

From High School to Healthcare: How AHEC is Shaping Future Healthcare Professionals

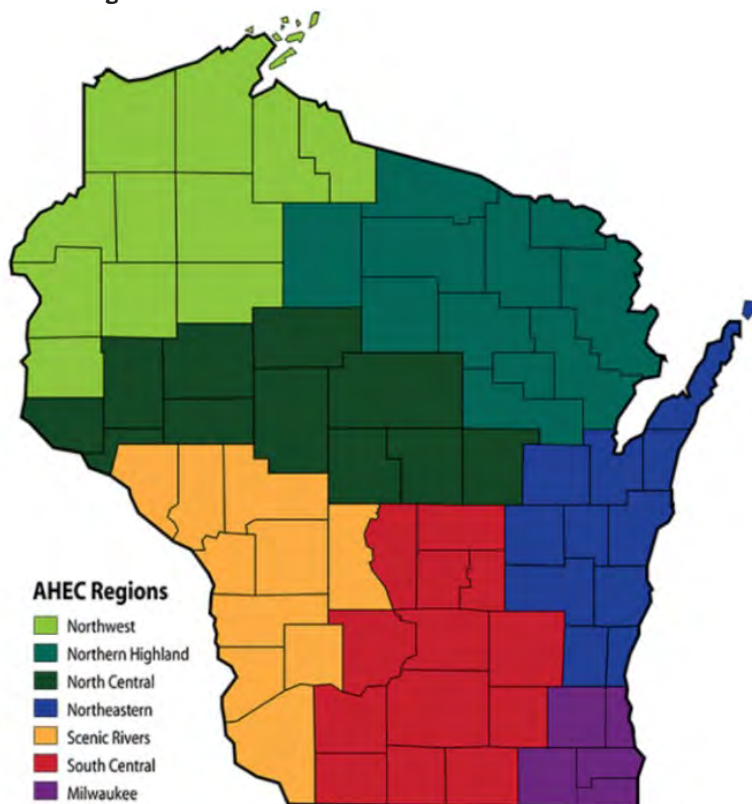
by Meghan Wendling, 2025 PharmD Candidate, Sarah Pagenkopf, PharmD, BCPS

Teenagers are often asked about their plans after high school graduation. For many teens, this is a difficult question to answer, complicated when they might be unaware of the vast array of careers that exist. This lack of knowledge or even exposure to the possibilities that await them in the future workforce might be one contributor to the current shortages in the healthcare-focused workforce. The Wisconsin Health Association 2024 Wisconsin Health Care Workforce Report reported vacancy rates above 10% for 8 of the 18 professions it tracks, including radiology technicians, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and respiratory therapists. This data indicates that over 10% of job positions statewide in these professions are unfilled. Although not yet at 10%, the rising vacancy rates for professions that require higher-level degrees, such as pharmacists, physicians, and nurse practitioners, are concerning due to the time it takes to acquire those degrees. For these more advanced professions, the vacancy rates will take longer to address and reverse.¹

One possible solution to increase students' interest in pathways to healthcare careers is implementing programs that can provide students with immersive experiences in unique settings, allowing them to explore their career options. Special consideration must also be given to the fact that career decision after high school graduation may be limited by access to resources, opportunities, and other experiences in a community or school district. Varied levels of skill and educational backgrounds have been shown to create inequalities in wages and opportunities for advancement. In particular, a lower level of education leads to fewer employment choices.² The national Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) program is actively working to address both immersive experiences and access to healthcare career pathways.

Aligned with the continued work of the

FIGURE 1. Wisconsin Area Health Education Centers' Seven Regions and the Counties Included in Each Region^{6,7}



Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Pharmacy Foundation, focused on the development of a strong and robust pharmacy workforce, Wisconsin Area Health Education Centers (WI-AHEC) offer opportunities for exploration and entry into various health-related fields. This article provides an introduction and overview of WI-AHEC services and regions and offers a call to action for pharmacy professionals and practices across Wisconsin to partner with this community organization, and others, to increase interest, knowledge, and passion for pharmacy.

Origin

Developed by the United States Congress in 1971, AHEC's goal is to recruit, train, and retain health professionals who have the desire to practice in

underserved populations. The AHEC mission is to "enhance access to quality health care, particularly primary and preventive care, by improving the supply and distribution of healthcare professionals." Today, there are over 300 AHEC locations across the United States that serve over 85% of counties.³

The WI-AHEC division was established in 1991 and is home to 7 AHECs, serving each of the following regions: Milwaukee, North Central, Northeastern, Northern Highland, Northwest, Scenic Rivers, and South Central (Figure 1). Programming varies among regions, as each region has its own hub and director (Table 1). Wisconsin AHEC continues to grow, and recent data showed that AHEC programs served over 6,500 learners in 2023-2024.⁴ The unique goals of WI-AHEC include increasing

diversity, broadening service distribution, enhancing health care quality, and improving health care delivery to rural and underserved areas and populations.³

WI-AHEC serves individuals across the continuum, from high school students to working health professionals; most participants are currently high school students. AHEC data shows that in 2023-2024, more than 5,400 high school learners were actively supported by and involved in AHEC-sponsored activities and programs.⁴ A wide variety of learner opportunities and immersive experiences are offered for high school students through WI-AHEC, including regional career pathways, workforce days, and various other programs (Table 2). WI-AHEC takes pride in the various opportunities and experiences it offers.

Elizabeth Bush, program director of WI-AHEC, is enthusiastic about WI-AHEC's innovative programming, stating, "Our AHEC centers are deeply rooted in their communities, committed to the learners they serve, and continuously learning. Programming decisions are driven by their needs with a learner- and community-first lens. To do this well, we have to be agile and ready to adapt. I see WI-AHEC always evolving and that makes me the most proud."

Health professional shortage areas (HPSAs), or areas where there is a shortage of health professional providers or providers to serve a specific population, are the target areas for AHEC-supported activities. AHEC is committed to connecting learners and students with opportunities that support access to necessary education and experiences that create professionals ready to enter the workforce in areas of need and reduce the impact that HPSAs have on communities.

The goals and mission of WI-AHEC are now more important than ever, with 44 of Wisconsin's 72 counties designated as HPSAs. Based on these numbers, over 1.7 million Wisconsin residents live in HPSAs.⁵

Opportunities for Learners

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has developed regional career healthcare pathways, which allow high school learners to enroll in healthcare-focused courses and experiences. Some students take learning a step further by

TABLE 1. Wisconsin Area Health Education Center Regional Information^{6,7}

<i>Region</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Director</i>
Milwaukee	1609 W North Ave Suite 202 Milwaukee, WI 53205	Suzanne Letellier sletellier@milahec.org 414-344-0675
North Central	518 S 7th Ave, Room 86 Wausau, WI 54401	Nicole Thill nthill@nahec-wi.org 715-849-2432
Northeastern	621 York St. Manitowoc, WI 54220	Kari Mueller karim@newahec.org 920-652-0238
Northern Highland		Gail Kell gkell@wnhahec.org 715-218-6699
Northwest	38568 Hanninen Road Marengo, WI 54855	Brad Gingras bgingras@nwwisconsinahhec.org 715-413-1573
Scenic Rivers	611 Broadway St. PO Box 95 Cashton, WI 54669	Laura Pettersen lpettersen@scenicriversahec.org 608-305-4704
South Central	136 W. Grand Avenue Suite 100 Beloit, WI 53511	Traci R. Lindsey trlindsey@scwahec.org 608-368-8322

TABLE 2. Summary of Opportunities for Students and Learners^{6,7}

<i>Opportunities for High School Students</i>	<i>Opportunities for College Students</i>	<i>Opportunities for Post-Graduate Health Professionals</i>
(5,474 learners in 2023-2024)	(877 learners in 2024-2025)	(151 learners in 2023-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional career pathways • Workforce days • Future Health Professionals • Various regional programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area Health Education Centers Scholars • Community Health Internship Programs • Community Health Immersion • Scholarship/loan repayment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing education • Community Health Worker training • WeCOPE Resiliency Training • Partnership opportunities • Scholarship/loan repayment

enrolling in dual college credit classes. High school students have the opportunity to earn industry-recognized credentials while also participating in career-based learning experiences.⁶ In partnership with DPI, WI-AHEC aims to increase awareness and adoption of healthcare pathways in high schools and expand access to HOSA-Future Health Professionals, a career and technical student organization with high school chapters nationwide. Students who participate in HOSA chapters at their local high schools can step into the practice of professionalism early and learn more about important networking skills through an introduction to a wide variety of professions in healthcare. Participation in HOSA

also allows high school students to begin building their professional networks as they collaborate with other students from across the nation.

High school students collaborating with and supported by WI-AHEC are also encouraged to participate in workforce days. These days are designed to expose learners to several careers within healthcare and allow them to hear directly from professionals in those careers about how they got to where they are, what a typical day in their career looks like, and the pros and cons of each career. The largest of these events is the Future Oral Health Workforce Day, a program held seven times throughout the state each year, offering students the

opportunity to learn about dental health professions, ranging from dentist to dental lab technician. North Central AHEC also offers Future Physician's Day each fall.⁶

The seven WI-AHEC regions also offer a customized variety of programs for high school students, unique to those regions, the communities served, and the unique social and societal needs of the region. AHEC regions partner with stakeholders in their counties and communities to offer a variety of programs focused on enrichment and immersion, allowing students to learn about their local health professions in a fun and engaging way. Experiences range from virtual reality simulations to field trips to career development training.

Bush says, "Showcasing the assets of our communities and connecting learners to our partners builds meaningful relationships and propels students on their career path."

In an effort to ensure continued interest and engagement in health professions, WI-AHEC also offers programs focused on the unique needs of college students. Programs include AHEC Scholars, Community Health Internship Programs (CHIPs), and other community-based programs.⁷

AHEC Scholars is a two-year program for current health professions students to broaden their training through both didactic and hands-on experiences. In 2023-2024, 223 AHEC Scholars represented a wide variety of professions, including advanced practice nursing, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, pharmacy, physical therapy, physician assistant, psychology,

public health, and social work.⁴ Bush shares her excitement for AHEC Scholars, saying, "Our programs offer a unique experience for learners. We bring together learners from all disciplines, attending schools and campuses across Wisconsin, to our communities where they experience and learn alongside and with each other. Our most recent AHEC Scholars cohort included learners representing 15 health profession disciplines from 17 different campuses across the state!" This year, the AHEC Scholars program will be introducing new topics, including artificial intelligence and tribal food and health sovereignty.

A recent WI-AHEC Scholar shared similar sentiments about their time in the program: "I thought it was a great adjunct program to help for interprofessional encounters, teach time management, and gain experiences that are not going to be typically available in most health care programs."

CHIP is another popular AHEC program offered to college students. CHIP participants are part of an eight-week summer internship focused on expanding knowledge in public health and experience in a wide variety of healthcare and healthcare business settings. CHIP participants receive a stipend based on their positions to help with living expenses. The 2023 CHIP program sponsored 104 students from 33 academic institutions.⁴

WI-AHEC is looking forward to welcoming a new cohort of AHEC Scholars and CHIP participants this year. For

students who may be interested in these unique opportunities, the AHEC website is a great resource to learn more about AHEC Scholars, CHIP, and other community-based programs.

With so many ways to get involved, learners and students interested in careers in health professions have a wealth of opportunities through WI-AHEC. Support does not stop once a student has graduated from high school or college. WI-AHEC also connects individuals in the workforce or entering the workforce to programs and financial resources offered by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). More information about scholarship eligibility, loan repayment, and other opportunities can be found on the WI-AHEC website. Unique opportunities are available for everyone, with some profession-specific or location-specific financial resources available.

To help working health professionals maintain certification, WI-AHEC also connects employees with continuing education opportunities, and currently offers community health worker (CHW) training. CHWs play an important role in public health, working in a variety of settings promoting wellness and encouraging others to live healthy lives by embracing healthy behaviors. For those who may have limited access to the resources needed to support living healthier lives, a dedicated CHW may be a valuable option for that needed support. Wisconsin AHEC is dedicated to training CHWs, and data



shows that the need for and employment of CHWs is projected to grow 14% from 2022 to 2032.⁸ Wisconsin AHEC is continuing to expand the CHW training program, launching its new Spanish-language version this fall in addition to their English-language offering.

In partnership with the University of Wisconsin Extension, WI-AHEC is committed to improving the emotional health of Wisconsinites. The WeCOPE program, comprised of seven evidence-based virtual learning sessions, is focused on helping adults cope with the stress of life. Virtual sessions encourage practices such as mindfulness, positive reappraisal, gratitude, and goal setting.⁹ These practices have proven to be effective in helping individuals manage their stress and improve their emotional health. Mindfulness-based therapy has been effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, including reducing relapse in those with previous episodes of major depression.¹⁰ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also promote gratitude, citing its ability to improve both physical and emotional health.¹¹ To register for WeCOPE sessions, visit the [WI-AHEC website](#).

Conclusion

As aspiring and practicing healthcare professionals, we all can help foster positive learning experiences and environments for students. Just as important is the

commitment to continued education and professional development. Wisconsin AHEC offers resources for individuals in all stages of their lives and careers. Take action today and familiarize yourself with the work that AHEC is doing in your own community and consider how you might take advantage of the available opportunities. Interested in supporting WI-AHEC's mission? Visit its website for more information about how to become a partner.

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