

“I Was There When It Happened”: Summary of the Wisconsin Pharmacy Workforce Summit

by Taylor Rough, 2026 PharmD Candidate

In August, 80 pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, and non-pharmacy stakeholders from across Wisconsin convened at the Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin (PSW) 2024 Pharmacy Workforce Summit.

The summit was a collaborative effort to shape the future of pharmacy in Wisconsin by fostering leadership, innovation, and sustainability in the pharmacy workforce. The health care workforce generally, and the pharmacy workforce in particular, has continued to be a top concern for many individuals in the state for many years. PSW and the Wisconsin Pharmacy Foundation (WPF) believe that longer-term, more sustainable solutions need to be developed now to meet the current and future demands on our system. To meet that goal, the summit was framed around one essential question: How can the profession support solutions to build and elevate the success of the Wisconsin pharmacy workforce over the next five years?

To fulfill that aim, participants were carefully selected through an objective pre-summit self-nomination process, assigned to subgroups representing various stakeholder perspectives, and tasked to work together

to develop a set of recommendations and creative solutions for positive change. With this preparatory work in hand, the summit served as the place to collate and align recommendations, bridge existing gaps, and prioritize strategies to form a roadmap to address current pharmacy practice workforce challenges and foster the growth of the workforce pipeline.

Pre-Summit Preparation

Prior to the summit, invited participants were divided into nine breakout subgroups, each focused on unique pharmacy workforce perspectives. The subgroups were:

- Guidance Counselors and K-12 Educators
- Human Resources Recruitment & Talent Development
- Non-provider Employers (e.g., Pharma, PBM, Research)
- Pharmacy Examining Board, Legislature & State Workforce
- Provider Employers (large chain, community pharmacy, hospital and health system pharmacy)
- Pharmacy Residencies and Residency Program Directors
- Rural Healthcare & Workforce

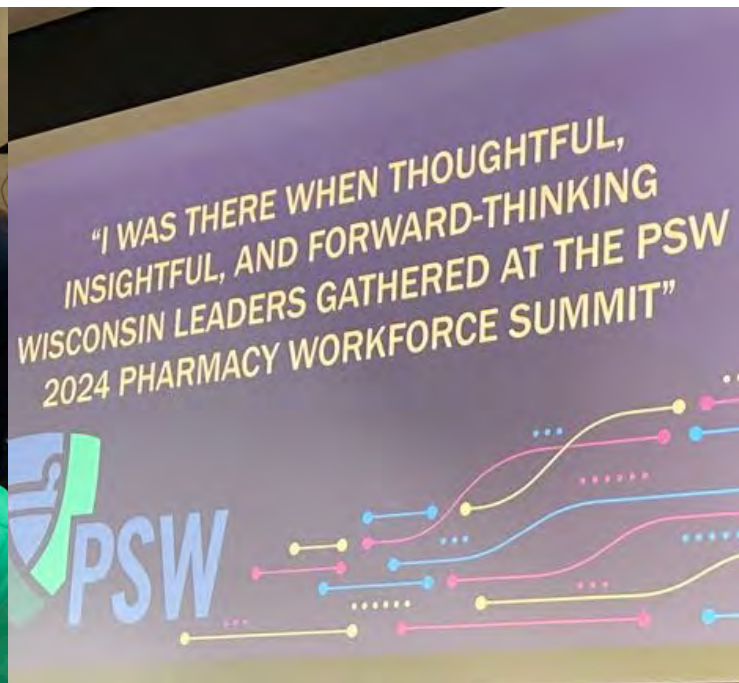
- Schools of Pharmacy, Healthcare Academia & Students (all levels)
- Pharmacy Technicians

Each subgroup had an assigned leader and scribe, with participants thoughtfully assigned by the Summit Planning Committee to ensure multiple backgrounds and experiences were considered when developing recommendations.

Three months prior to the onsite summit, selected readings and supplemental data were shared with all invited participants, summarizing contemporary pharmacy workforce trends and challenges. Drawing from the Wisconsin Hospital Association 2024 Wisconsin Health Care Workforce Report¹, PSW identified four key domains for targeted recommendations:

- Pathways for new entrants
- Removing legal, regulatory and payor obstacles
- Practice, policy, and payment reform
- Technology-enabled practice

Subgroups then met remotely twice leading up to the summit to brainstorm recommendations from the perspective of their assigned subgroup.



Opening Remarks

The day-long event was kicked off by PSW Executive Vice President and CEO, Sarah Sorum, and WPF Managing Director and Summit Co-Coordinator, Kate Hartkopf, who encouraged participants to prioritize positivity, collaboration, and solution-oriented work focused on possibilities rather than problems. David “DZ” Zilz, clinical professor emeritus at the UW-Madison School of Pharmacy, former director of pharmacy at UW Hospital, and past president of the Wisconsin Society of Hospital Pharmacists, then shared an inspirational message about the importance of engagement with pharmacy professional organizations and taking precise action to make a difference. He reflected on his experience at the 1985 American Society of Health-system Pharmacists Hilton Head Conference² and other pivotal moments in the evolution of the pharmacy profession where an opportunity for innovation and change was presented, and he was there. He challenged participants to carry that mindset throughout the day and to consider how this event could lead to advancements in pharmacy practice and patient care for years to come. He shared his belief that history would show at the end of the day that all participants could say, “I was there when thoughtful, insightful, and forward-thinking leaders gathered at the PSW Pharmacy Workforce Summit to address the critical issue of recruiting a diverse and capable group of individuals into the pharmacy workforce for decades to come.”

Why Wisconsin Pharmacy is Special

Following opening remarks, Executive Vice President and CEO of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, Lee Vermeulen, was interviewed by Summit Co-Coordinator Dave Hager, a managing director at Visante, to share his national perspective on the pharmacy workforce and a deep connection to Wisconsin pharmacy.

Vermeulen began his comments on why state-level leadership and advocacy are crucial to the advancement of the pharmacy profession. Additionally, he shared what he saw as potential gaps in the initial recommendations that should be addressed during the event.

Innovation in pharmacy practice must occur at the state level, where it is easier to engage members and create action, and Wisconsin has a long-standing history of leading the profession in practice innovation. Vermeulen and Hager shared examples of why Wisconsin is a great place to practice pharmacy. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians are supported by a strong, cohesive pharmacy professional organization that encourages high-level engagement, community, and innovation, which creates an excellent setting to foster change.

Vermeulen shared his thoughts on the most urgent issues facing the profession at a national level. One major barrier is the lack of public awareness about how pharmacists are essential to patient care and positive outcomes. With the growing

workforce shortage looming and significant negative impacts on patients on the horizon, he urged all pharmacists to consider it a professional obligation to tell their stories to encourage K-12 and undergraduate students to consider a career in pharmacy.

Vermeulen encouraged attendees to avoid placing too much emphasis on recruiting pharmacy technicians to become pharmacists. While that career path is one that some pharmacy technicians consider, many others desire the recognition of the pharmacy technician role as a critically important one that represents a desirable career path of its own, not to be diminished by implying that to contribute, technicians need to become pharmacists. Rather, he emphasized, more needs to be done to advance the professional role of pharmacy technicians as meaningful members of the patient care team, including the development of bachelor’s degree programs for technicians, allowing employers to justify appropriate pay for entry-level pharmacy technicians.

Finally, Vermeulen and Hager called on participants to be brave and bold in generating new ideas throughout the day for resolving current pharmacy workforce challenges.

Breakout Sessions and Recommendation Generation

Throughout the summit, each subgroup was assigned a table and met in breakout groups to refine their pre-summit recommendations and create



proposed timelines and stakeholders. Large-group sessions provided an opportunity for summit participants to share diverse perspectives and prioritize high impact recommendations. The energy in the room was palpable throughout the day. Participants were excited to share experiences from their workplaces and rallied around recommended near- and longer-term tactics. During discussions and even breaks, there was a constant hum of chatter in which participants were sharing their excitement about being part of something special to improve practice in all areas of pharmacy, connecting with long-time colleagues and new faces, and sharing experiences to generate solutions.

By the end of the day, the group generated a concise list of high-impact recommendations that will serve as a five-year strategic plan for PSW and other Wisconsin pharmacy stakeholders to drive positive change for the profession.

Urgent Recommendations

While further publications will share the full summit results, five themes emerged by the end of the summit.

First, the impact pharmacists have as healthcare professional must be more assertively communicated with external stakeholders to create a more uplifting view of the profession. Many people do not understand what pharmacists do outside of dispensing prescriptions. We must develop clear, standardized messaging about the impactful role that pharmacists and pharmacy technicians have as part of the patient care team and be more strategic in communicating this message more broadly and effectively. Additionally, messaging about careers in pharmacy must be focused on K-12 students, as is done by other professions. This could also include catering to the media formats young students use, increasing social media presence and visibility, and expanding youth apprenticeship opportunities and accessibility.

Second, more needs to be done to elevate the professional role, education, and salaries of pharmacy technicians. Pharmacy technicians are crucial to providing timely, accurate care to patients, yet many are leaving pharmacy in pursuit of other opportunities where they receive higher pay and improved working conditions.

One recommendation from the event was to pursue additional levels of pharmacy technician roles with differences in credentialing and training requirements aligned with those roles. This would enable a higher standard that will ultimately drive salaries up to meet the investments employees make. Additionally, there is a need for greater mentorship for pharmacy technicians, especially for those interested in advanced roles and non-traditional technician roles like informatics and leadership.

Third, there is a critical need to expand youth apprenticeship programs and enhance professional development opportunities for pharmacy technicians. By increasing access to and promoting apprenticeship programs, we can encourage early interest and commitment to careers in pharmacy. Furthermore, offering more avenues for professional growth will not only improve the career ladder for technicians but also empower them to take on new functions and create more innovative pharmacy services. This shift would allow pharmacists to concentrate more on patient-centered initiatives, ultimately enhancing the quality of care provided. There are many resources available that can be stored in a central fashion to help accelerate the success of these efforts.

Fourth, the workforce is changing in its demographics and values—pharmacy needs to get ahead of this and be an example, rather than fighting change. This category is broad but includes topics like advocacy to streamline regulatory barriers to working in pharmacy, such as removing barriers for refugee or immigrant pharmacists, removing financial barriers by creating incentives to practice in rural settings, and reducing workforce demand by leveraging technology to offload low-level tasks, ultimately improving patient access.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, is to maintain hope, optimism, and positivity in the face of adversity. Workforce-related challenges in healthcare are not new and are often described as a looming misfortune with no obvious solution, which is not conducive to fostering positive change. What's needed are people who champion the cause, approach it with optimism, and take action to stimulate solution-oriented conversation and change. Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians are expert problem-

solvers and collaborators who are prepared to handle uncertainty as we work to improve the conditions and sustainability of the pharmacy workforce. The PSW Pharmacy Workforce Summit serves as a great example of this.

Next Steps and Closing Comments

The PSW Pharmacy Workforce Summit was an important first step in addressing current pharmacy workforce challenges, but it will also require consistent effort to successfully implement the recommendations. The PSW Board of Directors met in September to review the full set of summit recommendations and began incorporating them into the PSW Strategic Plan, entitled “Destination 2030,” which aims to build a sustainable workforce, inspire professional growth, elevate patient care with technology, and advocate for pharmacist and pharmacy technician roles in health care. The Wisconsin Pharmacy Workforce Commission, consisting of summit stakeholder group leaders, continues to refine the recommendations considering feedback from summit participants. PSW will then publish a final set of summit consensus recommendations and provide ongoing leadership to advance the planning and implementation of recommendations with engaged stakeholders across the state and profession.

In conclusion, the PSW 2024 Pharmacy Workforce Summit was our nation's first state-based pharmacy workforce summit, and it was a resounding success. PSW brought together an incredible group of pharmacists, employers, leaders, and other stakeholders and collaborators to discuss current challenges and potential solutions facing our profession. The collaboration, leadership, creativity, engagement, and solution-oriented approach displayed throughout the day was amazing. The bringing together of various stakeholders in pharmacy to develop a connected and intentional plan for the future of the pharmacy workforce exemplifies the strength of Wisconsin pharmacy and aligns perfectly with PSW's mission of “One Voice, One Vision.” I cannot wait to see the next steps and results of this very important work and will one day look back and say, “I was there when a group of thoughtful

Wisconsin leaders convened to influence the future of the Wisconsin pharmacy workforce for decades to come.”

And finally, one last thought: Events like this cannot happen without a great deal of support from volunteer leaders and financial sponsors. PSW would like to extend heartfelt gratitude to Visante, Gilead, Pharmacists Mutual, and the Wisconsin Pharmacy Foundation for their financial support to make the summit happen; to

Visante for its leadership and volunteer efforts in planning and orchestrating the summit from its inception to reality; to the summit planning committee members; and to all subgroup chairs and scribes for going above and beyond to make the summit a success.

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I WAS THERE!



PHARMACY SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN WORKFORCE SUMMIT

THURSDAY, AUGUST 24, 2024
WISCONSIN DELLS