

## Inexcusable

Posted on Apr 03, Posted by [Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



***Senator Smith sets the record straight on the need for Republicans in the legislature to release \$15 million from the Joint Finance Committee to Chippewa Valley health care providers.***

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EAU CLAIRE - On February 28th Governor Evers signed Senate Bill 1015 into law. This bill moved \$15 million that had been targeted for HSHS to expand behavioral health services into a new fund for helping with the HSHS closure. The bill was brought to the floor and passed with overwhelming bipartisan support after the announcement that HSHS was closing two regional hospitals.

In their haste, Regional Republican legislators introduced a second bill, Senate Bill 1014, to restrict the \$15 million only for emergency department capital improvements, despite local health care providers asking for flexibility with funds to address staffing and for a whole host of other urgent needs.

Since the bill fell short of what we needed to address the crisis, Representative Jodi Emerson (D-Eau Claire) and I introduced amendments to incorporate the on-the-ground information we

were hearing so we could take full advantage of the \$15 million. Admittedly, \$15 million is not going to truly fill all the gaps from two hospitals and 19 clinics being closed, but it was what the Republican majority was willing to offer.

It is a good thing Governor Evers was listening to local health care providers too. He vetoed Senate Bill 1014 that unnecessarily restricted the money. Thanks to the Governor's action, area health care providers can now use the \$15 million to expand emergency departments, urgent care services, OB care, mental health treatment and other urgently needed services left behind since HSHS' closure.

That's what happened, despite what Republicans might be saying. Now, Republicans are so upset about screwing this up that they are withholding the \$15 million.



While my Republican colleagues make excuses, we've waited over a month for them to release the \$15 million to DHS. The current red herring excuse to distract from their inaction is that the money will go outside of Eau Claire and Chippewa counties, despite the request from DHS explicitly prioritizing Eau Claire and Chippewa counties.

Investments outside of our two counties isn't needed, as evident by the fact that Oakleaf has already begun purchasing four clinics in Cornell, Ladysmith, Menomonie and Rice Lake. The most pressing needs are in Eau Claire and Chippewa counties – that's why the Department of Health Services is requesting the Joint Committee on Finance to release the \$15 million to help our communities.



While Republicans refuse to release \$15 million for our communities, the ripple effect in our region is being noticed. Rusk County, one of Wisconsin's most impoverished areas, recently approved \$1.6 million to purchase a clinic and is now leasing it out to Oakleaf. Everyone is pitching in, but Republicans are noticeably absent with the \$15 million already approved.

We've also seen local news stories reporting that the hospital closures have dramatically affected EMS services. It was reported that Sacred Heart took in roughly 150 ambulance deliveries each month that the remaining hospitals are having to cover. If Republicans on the Joint Finance Committee release the \$15 million, this could really help fill the gap for local EMS providers.

Mayo is at capacity and Marshfield Clinic is hanging on by a thread based on their recent bond rating report. We can't let Republicans play games with the \$15 million that could go a long way for a new partner or existing providers to invest in critical health care needs.

Republicans need to stop making excuses, stop playing politics and release the \$15 million. The lies and partisanship are inexcusable for the crisis facing the Chippewa Valley.

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*Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.*

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