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**Interest group spending sees big drop in second half of 2019**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Interest groups spent $16.7 million lobbying the state Capitol during the second half of 2019, a big drop from the same period two years earlier, according to a WisPolitics.com check of filings.

Lobbying over the second half of 2017 hit a high-water mark with $18.5 million spent trying to influence the Capitol as the budget dragged into September with GOP lawmakers in the Assembly and Senate bickering over final details. The $18.5 million spent over the six-month period was a significant uptick from the $15.6 million dropped during the same period two years earlier.

But that activity tailed off significantly for the same period in 2019 for obvious reasons: the budget was done on time, while the Senate was in just two days during the fall floor period and the Assembly just three. Altogether, lobbyists spent 93,920 hours over the last six months of 2019 trying to influence the Capitol, compared to 102,150 hours during the same period in 2017.

The dip in spending over the last six months of the year also helped drop the overall spending in 2019 below 2017. Last year, groups spent $34.6 million lobbying the Capitol, compared to $37.3 million for 2017.

Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce was the biggest spender for lobbying, dropping $388,450 for the six-month period.

The Wisconsin Hospital Association was No. 2 at $343,432, while the Wisconsin Credit Union League was No. 3 at $308,527.

WMC reported it spent 14% of its time on workforce training with another 11% on the regulation of PFAS, a chemical used in products such as firefighting foam and nonstick cookware. Several bills have been introduced this session after the chemical has been found in the Marinette-Peshtigo and Madison areas.

The group’s lobbying reports didn’t specify how much work it put in on various proposals introduced this session on PFAS.

The rest of WMC’s lobbying during the six-month effort fell under minor efforts, which are issues that accounted for less than 10% of the organization’s overall time.

Scott Manley, WMC’s executive vice president of government relations, said the focus on workforce training included pushes for additional equipment for high school classrooms to teach skills such as welding and funding for instructors to teach needed workforce skills.

Manley said there were some successes on those fronts with the budget. But WMC sought to continue those conversations in the last half of the year, specifically on opportunities to pump up spending on marketing Wisconsin as a great place to live, work and raise a family.

He said Wisconsin has a demographics challenge that requires efforts to draw more people here to meet the demand of employers.

“It isn’t just the fact that we’ve got a shortage of skilled workers. We have a shortage of all workers, period, and it’s a demographic problem,” Manley said.

The WHA spent 15% of its effort during the period supporting legislation requiring the Department of Health Services to reimburse costs for interactive telehealth under the Medical Assistance program.

SB 380 was signed into law this fall. The rest of the WHA’s efforts were listed under minor efforts.

WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding said the new telehealth law is a perfect example of the group’s efforts to “move the needle” to address health care challenges.

“It increases access to care, had bipartisan authors, enjoyed unanimous support and now it’s law,” Borgerding said. “It takes a lot of time and resources to lobby in the comprehensive way WHA does it.”

The Wisconsin Credit Union League spent 24% of its effort on the Assembly and Senate versions of legislation that made changes to laws governing financial institutions. The changes include reducing the period for payment for lost, destroyed or stolen checks to 30 days from 90 days.

The Senate version of the bill, SB 457, was signed into law in the fall.

The group put another 20% of its effort behind the Assembly and Senate versions of legislation to allow financial institutions to refuse or delay a transaction if they believe a vulnerable adult is being exploited.

The legislation — AB 481 and SB 429 — has received public hearings in both houses. The rest of the top 10 included: Wisconsin Realtors Association ($292,495), Wisconsin Infrastructure Now Inc. ($242,620), Wisconsin Insurance Alliance ($201,613), Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation ($200,896), Wisconsin Automobile and Truck Dealers Association Inc. ($190,577); Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association ($189,372), and the Wisconsin Counties Association ($184,643).

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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