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Forward Analytics Study Finds Healthcare Has Overtaken Manufacturing as Wisconsin's Largest Employment Sector

MADISON, Wis. – A [brand new report](#) released by Forward Analytics finds that Wisconsin's workforce has reached a tipping point: for the first time, healthcare and social assistance professions have surpassed manufacturing as the state's largest employment sector.

From 2001 to 2025, manufacturing employment fell from 560,000 jobs to fewer than 460,000 today, while healthcare and social assistance employment grew from 321,000 to more than 463,000 over the same time period. Wisconsin joins the 46 other states that have made this transition, following national trends.

Manufacturing in Wisconsin is still a vital sector, employing nearly 460,000 workers at an average annual wage of \$75,117 and contributing an estimated \$74 billion to state GDP. The transition follows shifting demographic and economic patterns, driven by the needs of an aging population.

What the transition means for living standards, however, depends heavily on where growth within the healthcare sector occurs. Annual pay ranges from around \$30,000 in social assistance to more than \$92,000 in ambulatory care. The report finds that the lowest-paying sector — social assistance — has grown at the fastest rate, while higher-wage clinical roles lag behind. More concerning, while the demand for nursing and residential care services has increased, the subsector most tied to Wisconsin's aging population has seen a decrease of 5,000 jobs since 2019.

"Wisconsin's dominant employment sector shifting from manufacturing to healthcare signifies shifting demographic needs more than a straightforward decline," said **Kevin Dospoy, Director of Forward Analytics.** "Manufacturing will continue to be a vital cornerstone of the state's economy, but the market has changed to fit the demand of our aging population. Wisconsin will face real workforce and wage challenges in this decade and the next if that growth continues to be concentrated in lower-wage jobs rather than more in-demand health care workers."

The Forward Analytics report makes clear that the transition from manufacturing to health care as Wisconsin's dominant employment sector reflects deep demographic forces rather than a simple industrial decline. Whether that transition strengthens or strains the state's economy will depend on

whether workforce investment and wage growth keep pace with the services an aging population requires.

[VIEW THE FULL REPORT](#)

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Forward Analytics is the research division of the Wisconsin Counties Association. Its mission is to use data to identify challenges facing Wisconsin and share this information with state and local leaders to help them make informed policy decisions. Forward Analytics is led by Director Kevin Dospoy.