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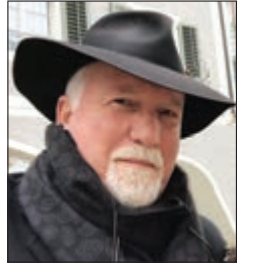
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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The Joys and Blessings of Christmas

Dear Reader,

Christmas holds many meanings for those who celebrate this special day and the season that surrounds it. At its heart, Christmas signifies the birth of Christ, a moment of profound spiritual importance. But it also brings to mind the joy of giving, with gifts and presents for little boys and girls, each package wrapped with love and anticipation.



While we often find ourselves striving to be our best during the holiday season, the true magic of Christmas shines brightest in the eyes of a child. In their wonder and delight, we are reminded of the simple, pure joy that this time of year brings.

Merry Christmas to all.

PATRICK J. WOOD
Publisher

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Lead expense

City will need to come up with \$6.1 million next year for lead pipe program



City leaders learned they will get a pretty hefty bill next year for the city's lead pipe replacement program: \$6.1 million.

That's what the loan will be as part of the funding cycle for next year's lead pipe replacement program the city began this year.

The city will receive a forgivable loan of more than \$8 million and a regular loan of \$6.1 million. The money comes from the Bi-partisan Infrastructure bill, and Wausau was one of the first cities in the country to get the funding. Lead pipes lead to a number of adverse health outcomes, especially in developing children.

Federal officials who visited Wausau during photo opps said the program would fund replacing the city's roughly 8,000 lead lines, but didn't talk about the loan aspect of the program. And next year's loan, while favorable because it includes more money in forgivable loans than money that needs to be paid back, concerned city council members because of the high price tag. And that price tag came off a budget in which the mayor called for cuts to keep the levy increase under 2.5%.

"When I voted for this, I had questions in regards to the funding," said city council member Gary Gisselman. "Now one year later we see \$6 million. And I question it again."

Public Works Director Eric Lindman said this year was likely to be the most favorable terms the city would get for lead service line replacement funding. The next

years are expected to be more competitive as more municipalities start applying for the funding.

The related motion, to reimburse expenditures from the safe drinking water revolving loan fund, passed narrowly by a vote of 6-4.

Officer-involved death in Grand Rapids under investigation

State police are investigating the death of a woman shortly after she was taken into custody by police in Grand Rapids in Wood County.

State officials say police responded to a welfare check on a woman in the 7500 block of Kellner Road in Grand Rapids. The woman was uncooperative and taken into custody, according to the report. But the woman while in custody became unresponsive; police then took her to the hospital where she was later pronounced dead, state officials say.

No firearms were discharged during the incident.

The officers involved in the incident were placed on administrative leave per policy, and they were wearing body cameras during the incident, police say.

Fuzzy's Taco Shop closes after less than two years open

The taco shop that opened up in the former Wendy's building has closed.

Fuzzy's Taco Shop spokespersons says that the store has officially closed on Dec. 1. That's a little more than a year after it first opened.

City Pages reached out to a Fuzzy's Taco Shop spokesperson about why the shop closed. A spokesperson confirmed the closure by the franchisee on Dec. 1 but did not answer the question about why it closed.

The site had previously been a Wendy's, which closed after a number of employees protested poor working conditions at the restaurant.

Women's softball team officially launches in Wausau

The Wausau Woodchucks organization has officially announced its new women's softball team.

Operating under the temporary Wausau Softball Club, the new team will kick off next year at Athletic Park. The team is similar to the Wausau Woodchucks, in that it will be a summer league for college softball players.

The team tapped former Woodchucks Assistant General Manager Brianne Barta to run the team as its general manager.

The team, which will get its final name via a contest the team is holding, will join the new college summer team in its second year. This year the league kicked off with teams in La Crosse, Madison, Minot, N.D. and Mankato, Minn. They'll play a 42-game season.



Brianne Barta will lead Wausau's new college summer team after working for the Wausau Woodchucks.

The Wausau Woodchucks planned to install astroturf at Athletic Field after the Woodchucks' season this year in order to keep up with the demands of having two sports playing full summer seasons at the park. Woodchucks owner Mark Macdonald said that was necessary to handle the two teams and the softball team wouldn't have happened without it.

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UWSP-Wausau looking to shrink its building footprint

UWSP-Wausau revealed in a county meeting recently something kind of shocking: The school is only using about 21% of its building space.

That comes from UWSP-Wausau spokesperson Gretel Stock on the heels of UWSP-Wausau's enrollment numbers dropping to 269 students this past fall — down from 368 students in fall of 2023 and part of an ongoing decline in the number of students attending the institution.

UWSP-Wausau is currently working with county leaders to find new uses for the rest of the space. Current operations are largely confined to the student resources center, student union and library, and the North Hall, Stock says. Traditional students at the campus behave more like non-traditional students, Stock says, as they have a lot going on outside of school and mostly just come for classes.

So that leaves many of the buildings unused, including the fieldhouse, the art studio, the greenhouse and most of the south hall. The unused buildings even include a planetarium.

When Stock presented the information to a county committee, she hadn't yet presented the task force's findings to the chancellor so couldn't get into specific details, but task force member and county board member John Robinson said the most likely uses would involve education. Partnering with the Wausau School District, for example, was a possibility he said.

Cutting down on UWSP-Wausau's footprint would save money as several former UW-Colleges have closed recently. UW-Platteville Richland, UW-Milwaukee at Washington County, UW-Oshkosh Fond du Lac and UW-Green Bay Marinette closed already, according to the Daily Cardinal. UW-Milwaukee at Waukesha and UW-Oshkosh Fox Cities will close in 2025, the Cardinal reported earlier this year.

Randy Fifrlick named new development director

The city named a new development director this week.

Wausau named Randy Fifrlick as its new development director, seemingly changing the title from community development director held by his predecessor.

Fifrlick previously worked as the city's economic development director under Liz Brodek. When Brodek resigned, Fifrlick was named interim director. Fifrlick previously worked in the village of Kronenwetter.

Wausau School District considering closing elementary schools

The Wausau School Board as early as this month could vote on a plan to shut down as many as four elementary schools.

Consultant Mark Roffers presented a plan to do just that Monday at the Wausau School Board meeting. The plan was developed over months of meetings by a task force made up of parents, residents and district staff.

The plan would close four elementary schools: Hewitt-Texas, Grant, Lincoln and Hawthorne Hills. Lincoln would become the west side 4K center, and with Riverview becoming the east side 4K site. The other three schools would be decommissioned.

The district is considering the plan as enrollments continue to drop in the district. The school board earlier this year killed a plan to restructure the district from top to bottom, choosing to focus on the elementary schools first. The board hired a consultant who convened a task force that started meeting earlier this year and came up with a plan to adjust the district's footprint to better fit the number of students.

The new plan would see the elementary schools reach 85% of their ideal capacity versus the 70% it is now. And it is expected to save the district \$4.5 million in maintenance costs over a 10-year period, \$400,000-\$500,000 in operating costs and roughly \$1.8 million in teacher salaries (through attrition over three years).

Board members hoped to meet later this month yet if possible to consider adopting the plan, and the meeting would be held in a larger public space to accommodate the public. As of press time a meeting date has not been set. **CP**



From the Attorney's Desk

by Jason Krautkramer, J.D.

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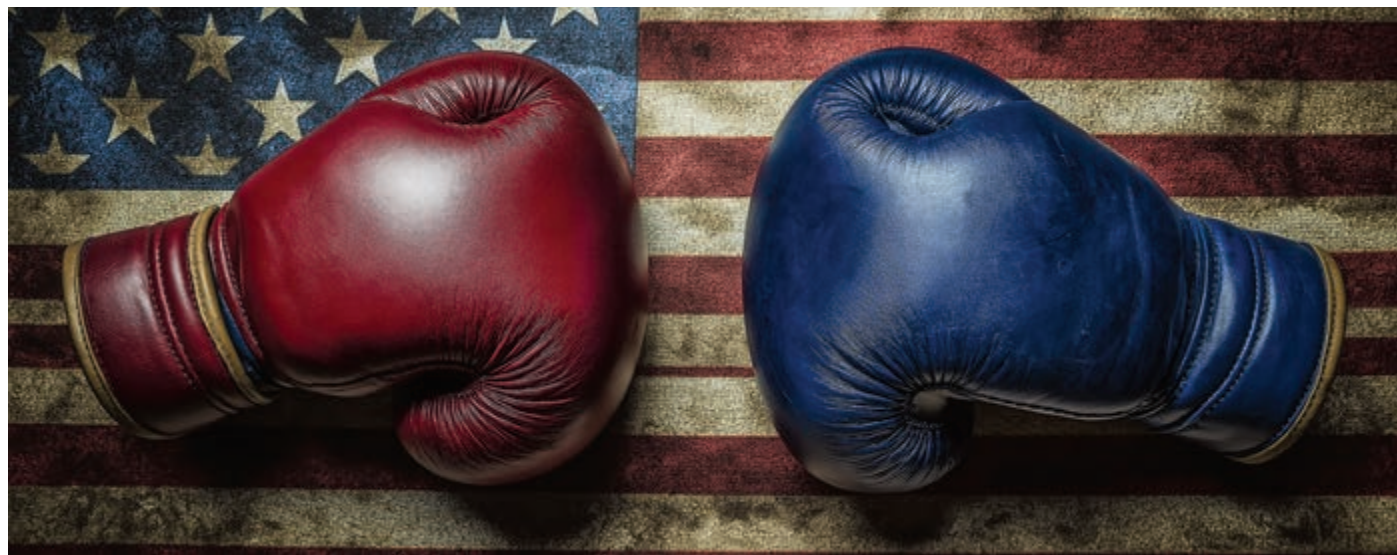
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Lawfight

AG petitions state Supreme Court to reverse lawmaker review of settlements



Dem AG Josh Kaul has petitioned the state Supreme Court to reverse a Court of Appeals decision upholding lawmakers' authority to review Department of Justice settlements under a 2018 lame-duck law.

Kaul is also seeking a temporary injunction to block the GOP-led Legislature from exercising that authority.

The filings come after the conservative-leaning 2nd District Court of Appeals last week reversed 2-1 a past ruling by Dane County Judge Susan Crawford finding the law unconstitutionally violates the separation of powers.

The three-judge panel, with Judge Lisa Neubauer dissenting, ruled the law constitutional because the Legislature has a "legitimate institutional interest via its

power of the purse" in at least some of the settlements in question. It also found DOJ failed to show the law "unduly burdens or substantially interferes" with the agency's ability to function.

Kaul and GOP lawmakers have been at odds over the law approved shortly before he took office. The law required he seek JFC approval on civil enforcement actions and civil actions DOJ prosecutes on behalf of executive branch agencies. Kaul has argued in court the law violates the separation of powers, while Republicans have accused him of failing to follow the statutes.

The then-conservative majority state Supreme Court in 2021 upheld the law's constitutionality. But the justices in the 4-3 decision noted that ruling was limited

because the lawsuit argued the statutes were unconstitutional in any circumstances and didn't provide any examples of how the laws have been applied.

Kaul's petition on Friday argues the law conflicts with the now-liberal leaning state Supreme Court's 6-1 ruling over the summer finding the JFC's process of blocking stewardship purchases after lawmakers had already approved appropriating the funds violated the separation of powers. The petition asserts there is "no meaningful distinction" between the "vetoes" found unconstitutional in that case and JFC's power over legal settlements.

Evers won't sign budget with work from office requirement

Gov. Tony Evers says he won't sign the next state budget if a GOP proposal requiring state employees back in the office is included in the final proposal.

"No, no, no. It's working," Evers said in a wide-ranging interview on WISN's "UpFront," which is produced in partnership with WisPolitics. "We've heard for years the idea that someone — it's not fair that so many of the people that work for the state of Wisconsin came from Madison, Milwaukee area. Well, we went

out of our way when we, you know, during the pandemic and post-pandemic, to hire people in Rhinelander and all sorts of different places in the state because we knew they can work from home or work from an office that's remote from Madison."

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos first proposed the idea two weeks ago on "UpFront."

"I know he's got all this data, and I can't wait to see it, but the fact of the matter is I think it's important for the state to be open to having people working from home, especially in parts of the state that we haven't had a chance," Evers said. "Not all the good workers are in the, the Madison and Milwaukee area."

Evers said he's in the midst of working on his state budget proposal, which will be unveiled in the new year, and casts doubt on the idea that he would include the full \$4 billion request from the Department of Public Instruction.

"That's a big number," he said. "I will say that, and so we'll take a look at it. Obviously, the only commitment we made is the money for the UW System, and that we will be putting in the budget. But as far as the education budget, we haven't even gotten that far in the system. All I know is the numbers I saw, I think, are a little

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high, and I'm not sure we can get there, but we'll see."

Evers says he's chosen a new DNR secretary

Gov. Tony Evers says he's selected someone to lead the Department of Natural Resources after a more than yearlong vacancy and expects to announce the pick "very, very soon."

The Dem gov spoke with reporters after

a Capitol Holiday Tree lighting ceremony yesterday. He also indicated he's chosen a woman to head the agency, but declined to name her.

"I tried calling her just before I walked out here today and didn't have a chance to chat with her," Evers said. "So that will be done very, very soon. ... I anticipate that she will accept."

Evers did not say exactly when he plans to announce the appointment.

Baldwin alarmed by some Trump picks, but excited about Duffy

U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin told a WisPolitics DC luncheon that some of President-elect Donald Trump's cabinet picks are "very troubling."

But the Madison Dem also said at yesterday's event that she's "excited" at the prospect of seeing a fellow Wisconsinite — former GOP U.S. Rep. Sean Duffy

— at the helm of the Department of Transportation.

Baldwin noted some of Trump's choices have already been replaced. That includes former U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, who removed himself from consideration as senators balked at his nomination due to allegations of sexual assault against him.

"I'm not sure the cast we have right now will be the cast we have in January," Baldwin said. **CP**



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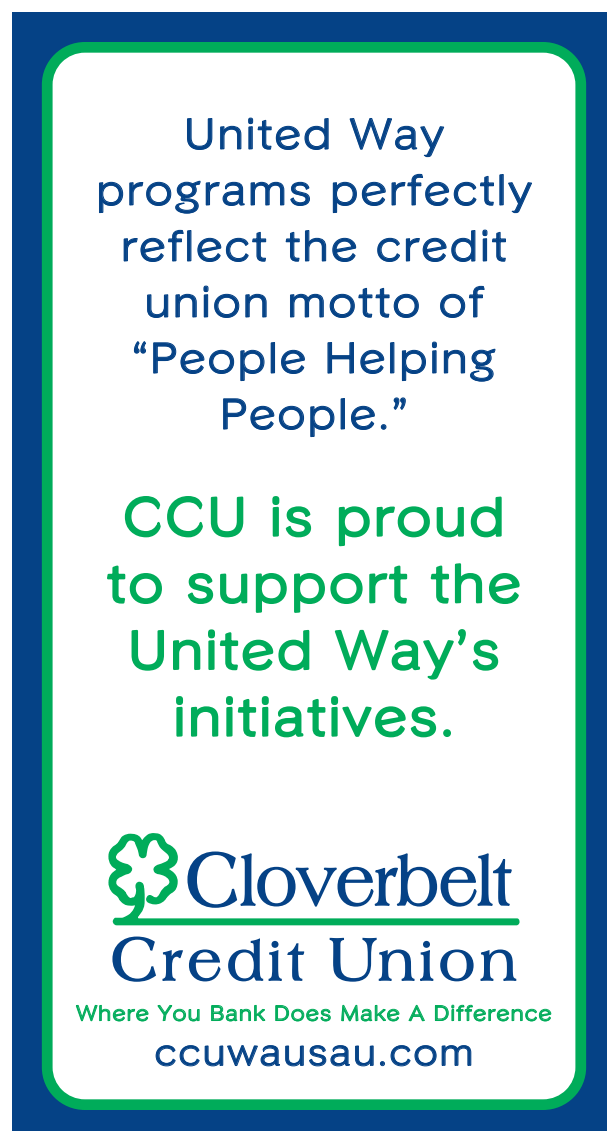
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Nursing WOUNDS

County nursing homes tend to offer better care, but 22 Wisconsin counties have sold or closed them over three decades.

Arlene Meyer is a busy woman.

The 86-year-old starts each morning by watching the news in her room at Pine Crest Nursing Home in Merrill, Wisconsin. Then it's off to the dining hall for breakfast so she can "BS with everybody out there." She never skips her daily walk and devours books delivered by the public library each week — anything except romance or science fiction.

The event calendar in Meyer's room lists a smorgasbord of other options: manicures and mimosas, chair Zumba, trivia, Packers watch parties and beer pong. Meyer spent a recent Friday at an exercise class in an area of Pine Crest that later hosted a happy hour with live music.

"The concept of old people, it's out," Meyer said, adding that "the days go by so fast" — an observation that surprises outsiders with duller expectations for nursing home life.

Meyer moved to Pine Crest in 2023 to recover from pneumonia. She liked it so much she stayed permanently. The nursing home's social media posts show her holding a lizard, relaxing during a spa treatment and singing a Willie Nelson song at karaoke — photos that brought joy to those who know her.

"Sassy Arlene! Love it!" one person commented on a photo. "Happy you haven't changed Arlene," wrote another.

Lincoln County owns Pine Crest, one of 36 county-owned nursing homes in Wisconsin. They tend to be better staffed, have higher quality of care and draw fewer complaints than facilities owned by for-profits and nonprofits, a WPR/Wisconsin Watch analysis of U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services data shows.

Wisconsin has more county-owned nursing homes than any state but Indiana. But perhaps not for long.

Over more than three decades, residents in 22 Wisconsin counties lost public nursing homes to sales or closures. This year alone at least five counties — including Lincoln — considered selling, started the sales process or sold.

County leaders say they have only two options while facing financial pressures and staffing shortages: sell or close the homes. Local organizers disagree, arguing counties should continue providing high-quality care for low-income older people and disabled adults.

Lincoln County's board voted to sell Pine Crest to a for-profit at the start of this year. After that buyer backed out, the board is planning to find a new one.

Meyer worries about potential disruptions at Pine Crest.

"I love it here," she said. "I sincerely do."

A flurry of nursing home sales and closures

Meyer, a former Lincoln County Board supervisor, doesn't own a phone, but she stays up to date on local happenings. It didn't take long before she heard rumblings about selling Pine Crest.

"I was teed off about it because of some of these SOBs," Meyer said. "They said, 'well, the cost factor.' Now I think about what jerks were running this."

Running a nursing home is expensive, and counties aren't required to do so — something officials often realize during recessions and inflationary periods.

The financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 was Wisconsin's busiest stretch for nursing home sales, with four counties selling.

Since inflation started surging in 2021, at least five counties outside of Lincoln have sold or considered selling:

- Iowa County closed its nursing home in 2022 after failing to find a buyer.
- A private nursing home chain took over Washington County's nursing home in July.
- The St. Croix County Board considered selling before voting against it.
- Sauk County's board this year approved a sale to a for-profit that still requires state health department approval.
- Portage County heard interest from one prospective buyer but chose not to sell following public pushback. It will decide later this month whether to look for a different buyer.

Meanwhile, dozens of for-profit nursing homes have closed in recent years.

Lincoln County started debating Pine Crest's future in 2022 while the board sought budget cuts. Then-board chair Don Friske noticed Pine Crest had for years run substantial annual deficits.

That's been the case since the 1980s for county-run nursing homes nationwide, said Anne Zahradnik, an associate professor of health administration at Marist College.

Those remaining "are a holdover from an orientation toward government solving problems," she added.

From 'poor farms' to nursing homes

Wisconsin's county governments have a long history of housing vulnerable populations.



Dora Gorski looks through aikido keepsakes from her late husband Ken in Wausau, Wis. While moving into Pine Crest Nursing Home in Merrill, Wis., where he spent the end of his life, Ken interacted with multiple people who knew him from his days as an aikido instructor. (Joe Timmerman / Wisconsin Watch)

Many ran "poor farms" or "poor houses" for residents experiencing poverty starting in the 1800s. Most states eventually created centralized nursing homes to serve older people and those with disabilities from across the state, while Wisconsin prioritized keeping people close to home. A Wisconsin network of local nursing homes and converted poor farms started receiving federal Medicaid funding in 1974, according to a Legislative Audit Bureau report.

Nursing homes for decades were the only long-term care option for populations they served, and people who relied on government assistance had few choices outside of county homes.

That is changing as people increasingly age at home or in assisted living facilities that offer more independence at a lower cost. Wisconsin's assisted living options hold more than double the beds of its nursing homes.

But assisted living, unlike nursing homes, can't care for people who need regular medical attention. Nor do they offer the same protections against evictions for residents who rely on Medicaid, the joint state and federal aid program to help low-income residents afford care.

More than a quarter of nursing home beds, on average, at for-profit and county-owned nursing homes sit empty, according to federal Medicaid data.

Almost 40 of Pine Crest's 120 beds are vacant, but Wisconsin can't afford to lose them.

Without nursing homes, hospitals struggle to find housing for their sickest patients, Zahradnik said. The Wisconsin Counties Association projects a need for roughly 10,000 new skilled nursing beds by 2035 as state demographics trend older.

To keep Pine Crest running, Lincoln County's board debated converting part of it into assisted living or even knocking it down to build a smaller nursing home with lower operation costs. Both options would require up-front money the county lacks, Friske said.

The only remaining option the board sees: selling.

Counties struggle to keep up

Medicaid policy is complicated and frequently changes. The program is also how most nursing home residents pay for care.

Lincoln County's board lacks expertise on nursing home management, making it hard to keep up, Friske said, echoing officials in other counties.

"We're horrible at it," he said.

As the board discussed exiting the nursing home business, it learned the county was short more than \$1 million in expected revenue to cover one year's costs.

The state has traditionally subsidized county-owned nursing homes, and it started increasing Medicaid reimbursements in 2022. The change shrunk ongoing county deficits to provide care, wrote Elizabeth Goodsitt, a spokesperson for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, which distributes the nursing home supplements.

That was positive. But shrinking those deficits meant counties would get smaller lump sum subsidies for operating nursing homes — something officials in multiple county governments didn't anticipate, leading to budget shortfalls.

"Just when you think you're one step ahead, you're two steps back," Washington County Executive Josh Schoemann said.

He described the unexpected loss of the subsidies as "just another brick in the wall" for a nursing home the county ultimately sold to a for-profit this year.

Lincoln County used federal pandemic funds to cover the unexpected subsidy loss — a short-lived option.

Despite supporting county-owned nursing homes, state officials don't always effectively communicate with counties, said Rene Eastman, vice president of financial and regulatory services at LeadingAge Wisconsin, an advocacy group for older adults.

Still, Eastman said, the recent Medicaid rate reimbursement hikes could ease financial pressures over time.

"If counties hung on for a little bit longer, they would really see the effects of

that funding infusion, and they would see the increased need in their communities," she said.

County leaders have historically asked voters to support nursing homes through ballot measures.

Voters in Green County, for instance, approved an April ballot measure to continue funding their nursing home.

Portage County voters approved one referendum in 2018 and a \$20 million referendum four years later for the construction of a new nursing home — renovations that still haven't started. Rising construction costs since the delay mean millions more are needed to fund the project, according to county board members who have blocked calls for a fresh referendum.

In Lincoln County, more than 80% of respondents to a 2023 Merrill Foto News and Tomahawk Leader online survey opposed selling Pine Crest.

But the board blocked two efforts to put Pine Crest's future on the ballot.

How private homes profit: Cutting staff, benefits

Friske had gotten unsolicited calls from brokers even before putting Pine Crest on the market, as have officials in other counties.

Why buy a money-losing nursing home?

For-profits can't simply build new facilities. The state determines the need for nursing home beds in different communities — requiring newcomers to typically buy a license from an entity already operating a facility.

Deficits under government ownership don't mean private companies can't turn a profit.

They might find savings by rejecting applicants with behavioral issues who require costlier care. Counties that own a nursing home typically send higher-needs residents there. Counties that don't own a nursing home still pay to send such residents to another facility that will accept them.

Private owners frequently reduce staffing and benefits upon purchasing county-owned facilities, Eastman said. Lower

staffing correlates with poorer care.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services rates nursing home staff on a 1 to 5 scale, considering time they spent with residents and turnover.

The median staff rating at Wisconsin's county-owned nursing homes is 5, the highest possible, according to WPR and Wisconsin Watch's analysis. That's compared with a median rating of 3 at for-profit facilities in the state.

A sign outside of the Portage County Health Care Center touts its 5-star rating. Grace Skibicki, a resident of 13 years and a former care center nurse, recognizes that as impressive.

She expects care to decline if a chain with a lower rating purchases it. She wouldn't plan to stick around.

"It's really scary because you don't know what's going to happen to you," Skibicki said.

Staff are also waiting to see what their future holds.

Nursing home work can be grueling with modest pay, accounting for significant staff turnover across the industry. But county-owned nursing homes employ public workers who earn county benefits and access to one of the country's best-funded retirement systems. That may explain why median turnover trends at Wisconsin's county-owned homes (41%) are lower than they are at for-profits (51%), WPR and Wisconsin Watch found.

Wisconsin's for-profit nursing homes drew a median of three substantiated complaints over the last three years, compared to a median of zero at county-owned facilities, which also fared better than for-profits and nonprofits in health inspection and overall quality ratings.

Nursing homes owned by Lincoln, Portage and Sauk counties all rate above average, but county officials believe private owners could run them better.

Counties struggle to make quick decisions the fast-changing industry requires, Friske said.

Potential buyers named in Lincoln, Portage and Sauk counties all own multiple facilities across the state. Two

own facilities in other states. That setup makes it easier for them to fund repairs or convert rooms to assisted living quickly without repeatedly asking taxpayers.

Care & Rehab Company, which initially sought to buy Pine Crest, owns six facilities in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Two share Pine Crest's "much above average" federal rating, but two others received "below average" ratings.

People for Pine Crest

Dora Gorski kept her husband Ken at home for as long as possible.

Ken, a father, veteran, martial arts instructor and first responder, was often too proud to admit to falling — even when Dora woke up to find him on the ground.

She initially got help from neighbors and home health aides who warned her about his worsening dementia. Ken eventually ended up hospitalized and in need of a wheelchair.

When Dora realized she'd have no way to get him into their house upon their return, Pine Crest was her first call.

The woman in admissions knew Ken, who had taught her children aikido. Once he moved in, a maintenance worker recognized Ken as his former martial arts teacher. A caretaker told Dora she knew Ken, too — having worked with him as a phlebotomist.

It turned out that Arlene Meyer, a fellow first responder who had long known Ken, lived down the hall.

"It was people who not just knew him as a doddering old man who is barely able to talk," Dora said. "They knew him as a respected instructor."

Two weeks before Ken's death in December 2023, Pine Crest hosted his 90th birthday party. His children, former students and friends, including Meyer, packed a community room.

"That meant a lot to Ken," said Dora, who still participates in a group called "People For Pine Crest," which opposes a sale.

"We own it. It's our place. We all take pride in it being here," she said.

The group spent 2023 urging the Lincoln County Board to keep the nursing home.

Their flurry of petitions, yard signs, T-shirts, public testimonies, phone calls and emails didn't work. The board voted to sell to Care & Rehab.

But an attorney and ally on the county board noticed a language problem in the sale agreement and sued the county to halt the sale.

Care & Rehab backed out before the case could move forward, offering People For Pine Crest a reprieve.

But Friske, who lost reelection this spring, sees a ticking clock. He expects Pine Crest will face a fiscal crisis that will force a closure unless it sells.

He resents any suggestion that his board colleagues don't care about those who depend on Pine Crest.

"The county board is not a congressman from Missouri, Arkansas and Texas, telling Wisconsin how to live," Friske said. "What's happening here is friends and neighbors who are elected to the county board. They live here, their families are here, we're all here."

Lincoln County has just two other nursing homes, both in Tomahawk and with lower federal ratings.

Dora Gorski, who lives 20 minutes from Pine Crest, said the short distance allowed her to eat breakfast with Ken most mornings. That routine would have been tough to maintain — doubling the length of her drive — had he lived in one of Lincoln County's two private facilities or the state veterans home in King, Wisconsin.

The county hopes to keep some nursing home beds in Merrill, said current Lincoln County chair Jesse Boyd, but they won't be county-owned. He agrees with Friske's financial outlook.

"Right now, we're drowning," he said.

The county now has lined up a couple of potential buyers for Pine Crest.

If a sale proceeds? Pine Crest won't be the same, Gorski expects. For now it's "full of neighbors and friends and people from our community, people who love us and know us," she said.

"You don't find that in some big city, and you don't find that in a private, for-profit nursing home." **CP**

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HIGHLIGHTS



ALTENBURGH CHRISTMAS



CIRQUE DREAMS HOLIDAZE

Altenburgh Christmas

Friday 12/13 | Grand Theater, Wausau

Speaking of annual holiday traditions, this jazz-filled who's who of local talented musicians is a must see every year. Jazz musician John Altenburgh has decades of experience playing and recording jazz and other music, and has also been putting on this show for decades, so you know you're in for a barn-busting holiday experience. The show has included plenty of notable area musicians like Mitch Viegut, Brad Emanuel, Marty Cheyka and more. 7:30 pm. \$45-\$72. grandtheater.org

Sweet Landmarks Gingerbread Contest

Saturday 12/14 | Marathon County Historical Society, Wausau

I may not be allowed into the Gingerbread Contest since that incident when I tried to eat all the entries (hey, they looked tasty!) but you can come check out all these delicious looking creations at the Sweet Landmarks Gingerbread Contest. Entrants really know their

architecture — they must be completely edible and substantially made of gingerbread but also must follow the styles of "Victorian, Neo-Gothic, Commercial, Bungalow or Ranch" according to the press release, and entrants are encouraged to model their creations after real places in Wausau and throughout Marathon County. Gingerbread entries will be brought to the Woodson History Center between 9 am and noon and the winning entry will be announced at 1 pm.

Wausau Community Theater presents A Christmas Carol

DEC. 12-15 | James Veninga Theatre, Wausau

For years Wausau Community Theater has put on a production of A Christmas Carol — and this year is no different. WCT will take to the stage this December to bring you the classic theater version of Charles Dickens' tale of the miserly work-a-holic Scrooge as he's visited by ghosts of Christmas past, present and future and learns to mend his... well, Scroogely ways. It's a classic tale that will delight even the most Bah Humbug amongst us.

Shows are Thursday 12/12 at 6:30 pm; Friday and Saturday 12/13-14 at 7:30 pm; and Sunday 12/15 at 2 pm.

Conquerors soccer home opener

Saturday 12/14 | Greenheck-Turner Community Center, Weston

So there was a little snafu with that exhibition game the Wausau area's new minor league arena soccer had planned on playing with the Milwaukee Wave — the game ultimately got postponed to the post-season due to "unfortunately circumstances." So now the first chance to see this brand new team play is this Saturday, as the newly minted Wisconsin Conquerors take on the Minnesota Blizzard. It also might be a chance for some of you to check out the Greenheck-Turner Community Center. 6 pm. \$10 adults, \$7 children under 12. wisconsinconquerors.org

Cirque Dreams Holidaze

Wed-Thurs 12/18-19 | Grand Theater, Wausau

Like many people, I have always been thoroughly amazed by the cirque du soleil-style performances. The amount of work and artistry that goes into developing those kinds of skills is mind-blowing. So I am very glad to see so many of these kinds of performances coming to the Grand, in a variety of styles. The latest is Cirque Dreams Holidaze, and while I shudder at alternative spellings, I think this event is one to mark on your calendars for sure. 7:30 pm. \$55-\$95. grandtheater.org

20 Watt Tombstone's Big, Gnarly Rock and Roll Toy Drive

Saturday 12/14 | Arrow Sports Club, Weston

20 Watt Tombstone is one of those Wausau-based bands that limits the amount of plays around town — they're often busy touring and making records. So when they do play around town, it's always worth checking out! The growling, distorted slide guitar grit of the duo fronted by Tom Jordan has been a fan favorite for some time around these parts and this show pairs their musical prowess as they collect toys to give to needy children for Christmas. Head-bang for a good cause and check out this great band along with bands Trash Pandas, Motherwind and Keith Daniel's psycho swamp stomp band. 8 pm. \$20 suggested donation. arrowsportsclub.com

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am, 12:55 pm, 4 pm; Sat. 11:20 am, 4:30 pm; Sun. 1:15 pm, 4 pm, 4:30 pm; Mon. & Wed. 1:50 pm, 4:30 pm; Tues. 12:55 pm, 4 pm

National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation (PG13): Fri. 1:30 pm, 7:20 pm, 9:50 pm; Sat. 2 pm, 7:10 pm, 9:40 pm; Sun. 1:30 pm, 2 pm, 7:10 pm, 9:40 pm; Mon. & Wed. 1 pm, 9 pm; Tues. 1:30 pm, 7:20 pm, 9:50 pm

For King + Country's: A Drummer Boy Christmas Live (TBD): Thurs. 6:50 pm; Fri. & Tues. 1:10 pm, 8:40 pm; Sat. 3:35 pm, 8:40 pm; Sun. 1:20 pm, 8:40 pm; Mon. & Wed. 1:50 pm, 6:20 pm

Wicked (PG): Thurs. 1:20 pm, 3:40 pm, 7:20 pm; Fri. & Tues. 10 am, 11 am, 2:40 pm, 6:20 pm, 7:30 pm, 9:50 pm, 3:40 pm; Sat. 2:40 pm, 6:20 pm, 7:30 pm, 9:50 pm; Sun. 10 am, 11 am, 2:40 pm, 6:20 pm, 7:30 pm, 9:50 pm, 3:35 pm; Mon. 1:30 pm, 3:30 pm, 5 pm, 7:10 pm; Wed. 1:30 pm, 3:30 pm, 5 pm, 7 pm, 8 pm

Gladiator II (R): Thurs. 1:10 pm, 5 pm, 8:40 pm; Fri. & Tues. 11:50 am, 3:30 pm, 6:50 pm, 10:10 pm; Sat. 12:10 pm, 3:30 pm, 6:50 pm, 10:10 pm; Sun. 11:30 am, 2:50 pm, 6:30 pm, 10 pm; Mon. & Wed. 1 pm, 4:20 pm, 7:40 pm

Red One (PG13): Thurs. 1:20 pm, 3:50 pm, 8:50 pm; Fri. 10 am, 3:10 pm, 7:10 pm, 10:15 pm; Sat. 1:30 pm, 7:10 pm, 10:15 pm; Sun. 10:20 am, 12:40 pm, 10:15 pm; Mon. & Wed. 1 pm, 4 pm; Tues. 12:45 pm, 3:10 pm, 7:10 pm, 10:15 pm; Wed. 7 pm

I am the Immaculate Conception (TBD): Thurs. 7 pm; Sat. 4 pm

Andre Rieu's Christmas Concert (TBD): Sat. 3 pm

Dr. Seuss' The Grinch (PG): Thurs. 1 pm, 4:30 pm

Elf (PG): Thurs. 1:10 pm

Solo Leveling: Reawakening (Dubbed) (TBD): Thurs. 1:50 pm (Dubbed)

Solo Leveling: Reawakening (Subtitled) (TBD): Thurs. 8:30 pm (Subtitled)

White Christmas 70th Anniversary (TBD): Sun. 4 pm, 7 pm; Mon. 7 pm

Marcus Mystery Movie (12/16) (PG13): Mon. 7 pm

ON STAGE

A Christmas Carol · Thurs.-Sun. 12/12-12/15, hosted by the Wausau Community Theatre at the UW Center for Civic Engagement, Veninga Theater, Wausau. Holiday tale about miser Ebenezer Scrooge and his encounters with the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present & Yet to Come. Starts at 6:30 pm on Thurs., 7:30 pm on Fri. & Sat., and 2 pm on Sun. \$25 adults, \$21 seniors & college, \$17 youth under ages 17, \$10 child under 10. wausacommunitytheatre.org

Central Wisconsin Musicians Jazz Ensemble · Thurs. 12/12, hosted by Central Wisconsin Musicians at Whitewater Music Hall, Wausau. Celebrate the season with the Central Wisconsin Musicians Jazz Ensemble's vibrant mix of jazz & holiday classics! Starts at 7 pm. Free admission. facebook.com/profile.php?id=100090947024499

A Swingin' Christmas: Erin Krebs & Friends · Thurs. 12/12, Stevens Point Country Club, Stevens Point. Jazz. Starts at 7 pm. \$30 general admission. Free for music students, 50% discount for working musicians & music educators. jazzcoterie.com

Handel's Messiah · Thurs. 12/12, hosted by Monteverdi Chorale at St Stephen Catholic Church, 1401 Clark St, Stevens Point. An inspiring performance of the English oratorio by G.F. Handel, in collaboration with incredible soloists & local instrumentalists. Starts at 7:30 pm. \$30 adult, \$20 senior, \$10 student/youth. Free for ages 5 & under. monteverdichorale.org

Tiding of Comfort & Joy · Fri.-Sat. 12/13-12/14, hosted by Wausau Pro Musica & Wausau Lyric Choir at First Presbyterian Church, 406 Grant St, Wausau. Welcome in the holiday season with a wonderful array of familiar music such as the Franz Biebl arrangement of Ave Maria for womens voices as well as a rousing rendition of O Come, All Ye Faithful for mixed voices arranged by Daniel Forrest performed by both choirs. In addition to combined choral pieces, both Wausau Pro Musica & Wausau Lyric Choir will perform some of their own holiday offerings. Starts at 7:30 pm on Fri. & 3 pm on Sat. Free. 715-581-5889

The John Alenburgh Christmas Extravaganza · Fri. 12/13, Grand Theater, Wausau. Enjoy an evening of jazz, blues and other holiday songs. Starts at 7:30 pm. \$45-\$72. grandtheater.org

Live Radio Adaptation: "Miracle on 34th Street" ·

Sat. 12/14, Presque Isle Community Center, 8306 School Loop Rd, Presque Isle. The free program is a potpourri of carols & the heartwarming story of the real Kris Kringle at Macy's department store in 1948, immortalized in the movie of the same name. Doors open at 6 pm. Show starts at 6:30 pm. Free. 715-904-9063

Trash Pandas, Motherwind, Keith Daniel's Psycho Swamp Stomp Band & 20 Watt Tombstone · Sat. 12/14, Arrow Sports Club, Weston. Rock 'n roll. 21+ unless with a parent. Doors open at 7 pm. Music starts at 8 pm. \$20 recommended donation. 715-359-2363

Holiday in Broadway · Sat.-Sun. 12/14-12/15, hosted by the Central Wisconsin Symphony Orchestra at Sentry Theater, Stevens Point. The Central Wisconsin Symphony Orchestra will be performing holiday music along with Tony-award nominee & Broadway star Christiane Noll. Starts at 7:30 pm on Sat. & 4 pm on Sun. \$45 adult, \$35 senior, \$15 students (with ID). cwso.org

Christmas at Oz · Sat. 12/14, Oz Nightclub, Wausau. Drag show. 21+. Starts at 10 pm. \$5 cover. 715-679-3606

Cirque Dreams Holidayze · Wed.-Thurs. 12/18-12/19, Grand Theater, Wausau. Enjoy a circus holiday theatrical event that fuses Broadway-style production with contemporary circus arts. Starts at 7:30 pm. \$55-\$95. grandtheater.org

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It's a Wonderful Life-A Live Radio Play · Thurs.-Sat. 12/19-12/21, hosted by the Central Wisconsin Area Community Theater at Sentry Theater, Stevens Point. Based on the story, "The Greatest Gift", by Philip Van Doren Stern, adapted by Joe Landry. Starts at 7 pm. \$5 per person. \$20 per family. cwact.org

Gingerbread Jamz: Allen Brothers Band · Fri. 12/20, Wildwood Zoo & Park, Marshfield. Funk, rock, pop, reggae, Americana. Starts at 6 pm. Free. Rotarywinterwonderland.org

Comedy Night at Rookies: Mike Brody & Katie Novotny · Fri. 12/20, Rookies Sportspub, Stevens Point. Comedy. Doors open at 6:30 pm. Show starts at 8 pm. \$10-\$20. eventbrite.com/e/rookies-comedy-night-tickets-1105972336029

Looney Lutherans-I'm Dreaming of a Looney Christmas · Fri. 12/20, Campanile Center for the Arts, Minocqua. Enjoy a show that blends music, comedy & holiday cheer. Starts at 7 pm. \$15-\$42. campanilecenter.org

Candlelight: Holiday Special featuring "The Nutcracker" & More · Fri.-Sat. 12/20-12/21, St Stephen Lutheran Church, Wausau. Enjoy a classical musical concert featuring "The Nutcracker", "Silent Night", "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" & "Jingle Bells". Starts at 8:30 pm on Fri. & 6:30 pm and 8:30 pm on Sat. \$25-\$53. feverup.com/m/256077

The Jake Ramsey Band, Codemaster · Fri. 12/20, Nevermore on Third, Wausau. Rock, blues, funk, jam. 21+. Starts at 9 pm. \$5. 715-298-0028

Gingerbread Jamz: Adam Bluhm · Sat. 12/21, Wildwood Zoo & Park, Marshfield. Acoustic folk/rock. Starts at 6 pm. Free. Rotarywinterwonderland.org

Brewery Comedy Tour · Sat. 12/21, Mosinee Brewing Company, Mosinee. Comedy. 18+. Starts at 7:30 pm. \$15-\$20. herronentertainment.com/events/category/mosinee-brewery/list

Lonestar · Sat. 12/21, North Star Mohican Casino Resort, Bowler. Variety. 21+. Starts at 8 pm. \$45-\$55. northstarcasinosort.com

Gingerbread Jamz: Brady Luke · Sun. 12/29, Wildwood Zoo & Park, Marshfield. Country. Starts at 6 pm. Free. Rotarywinterwonderland.org

Alive Again: A Tribute To Chicago · Sat. 1/4, Lucille Tack Center for the Arts, Spencer. Tribute concert to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame band Chicago. Starts at 7:30 pm. \$35. lucilletackcenter.com

ONGOING

Parent Aide Triple P In-Home Program · Children's WI, 705 S 24th Ave, Wausau. Program that promotes positive parenting practices to address and prevent a range of social, emotional, and behavioral problems in children and teens. For parents of children ages 0-17. 715-660-0397 for more information or to sign up

Marshfield Pickleball · Every Mon., Tues., Weds., and Fri., hosted by the city of Marshfield. Located at the Oak Ave. Community Center, 201 S. Oak Ave. Advanced ticket discounts available through the Parks & Rec department. Ci.marshfield.wi.us.

Learning Essentials About Parenting · Mondays, Children's WI, 705 S 24th Ave, Wausau. Learn how to solve problems and strengthen relationships in your home. Starts at 6 pm. Free. 715-848-1457 to register

Werle Park Plus Neighborhoods of Wausau · 2nd Monday of most months, Grace United Church of Christ, 535 S 3rd Ave, Wausau. Meet and discuss neighborhood issues. Use basement entrance off back of church. Starts at 6 pm. 715-845-7051.

AARP Chapter 272 Monthly Meeting · 3rd Mon. of each month. United Way Office, 705 S 24th Ave, Wausau. Each month will have a speaker discuss a current topic in the news or in the area as well as legislation being proposed that affects those over age 50. AARP membership encouraged but not required to attend. Starts at 1:30 pm. 715-571-6189

The Landing Literacy Book Club · 4th Mon. of each month. Book club at the Landing YMCA, Wausau. Book notices at YMCA, Literacy Council and Janke Bookstore. 11:30 am-12:30 pm. 715-841-1855

Senior Bingo · Every Tuesday, hosted by the Marshfield Parks & Recreational Department at Drendel Room, 211 E 2nd St, Marshfield. Starts at 1 pm. \$1 for 2 cards. 715-486-2041

Sweet Adelines Center Point Chorus · Every Tuesday, Harmony House, 3500 Harmony Lane, Stevens Point. Learn and sing 4-part A Capella music barbershop style. Starts at 7 pm. 715-630-3155

Joe & Dough Military Veterans Morning Social · 2nd Tuesday of every month, Elk's Club, 1132 Clark St, Stevens Point. Military veterans are invited to socialize with others, ask questions or relax. Select meetings will feature a guest speaker presenting a veteran-related topic. Complimentary donuts, sugar-free bakery items, coffee & tea will also be available for attendees. Starts at 8 am. 715-341-6194 for more info

Pine Tree Quilters Guild · 2nd & 4th Tuesday, Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, 6205 Alderson St, Weston. Join us for educational & informational gatherings on the 2nd Tues. at 6:30 pm & 4th Tues. at 10 am. pinetreequilters.org

Veterans Weekly Cup-of-Coffee at a Glance · Wednesdays, Denny's, Rothschild. Veterans can meet and enjoy a cup of coffee and meal. Starts at 10 am. More info at mikeheil123.wixsite.com/website

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Living out loud

OUTLoud is providing a space for LGBTQ youth

In 2024, many quietly live lives. They do not show who they are to others, but, in Wausau, a new group is changing this and encourages members to live out loud and be proud of who they are.

The OUTLoud, Inc. Marathon County LGBTQ Center began building in March and events with the organization kicked off in September. It sparked up thanks to OUTLoud, Inc. Board of Directors President Kristin Conway, and as Conway says, exists partly due to her self-interest.

“One of the reasons for starting this group is I have two kids who identify as queer,” she says. “I found myself needing resources, needing other parents, needing help finding mental healthcare, those sorts of things. Building a community is important and so is having people you can go and talk to. Wausau is smaller, it is not big like Milwaukee where there is a huge queer population.”

Searches of anecdotal data as well as empirical evidence back this up. The first Wausau Pride event only happened in 2022 in contrast to Milwaukee’s beginning in 1988 and, a study released by the Movement Advancement Project LGBTQ+ think tank in 2019 finds around 20% of America’s LGBTQ+ population lives in a more rural area. These parts of the United States often see a backlash against groups like OUTLoud, Inc., and, while this has happened slightly in the previous months, Conway is surprised it has been so light and has a plan to counter any hate.

“We have had a few comments here and there but, maybe it is because the word has not gotten out,” Conway adds. “It has been overall very positive. There are a lot of questions. For a lot of people who live in this area, they are not familiar with certain facets of the LGBTQ community. We send a newsletter, and it has a spot where people can go anonymously submit questions.”

Further developments to run alongside the support groups for LGBTQ+ parents and caregivers and trans and



non-binary residents of Wausau and the surrounding area include mentoring programs, a dedicated physical space to replace the various places OUTLoud, Inc. has held meetings as of this story’s filing and collaboration with professionals in the area like therapists.

A long road is unwinding ahead of OUTLoud (and last month’s election certainly created a lot of uncertainty), but, whatever else may happen, people have pride, feel pleased with what Conway and her peers offer and the mission to help out others is on the right track to succeed long-term.

“OUTLoud is dedicated to fostering a safe, inclusive, and empowering environment for LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies in Marathon County. We create community, educate our neighbors, and advocate for LGBTQ+ equity,” a line on the group’s website right now reads.

More about OUTLoud, Inc. is on Facebook or outloud-mc.org. Donations are welcome. **CP**

Evan J. Pretzer is a freelance contributor to City Pages. He can be reached at evanjpretzer.com or evan.pretzer@protonmail.com.

CITY pages every Thursday

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