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**Groups spend $17.8M lobbying during first half of 2019**

Groups spent $17.8 million lobbying in Wisconsin during the first six months of 2019, a dip from the previous budget cycle as divided government returned to the Capitol for the first time in more than a decade.

Still, the biggest three spenders for the six-month period all spent slightly more compared to two years ago.

The [Wisconsin Hospital Association](https://www.wha.org/) topped the list for most spending during the six-month period at $430,138, followed by [Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce](https://www.wmc.org/) at $414,184 and [Marsy’s Law for Wisconsin](https://www.equalrightsforwi.com/" \t "_blank) at $384,479.

WHA President and CEO Eric Borgerding said it was a “pretty intense budget process” for his group as most of its effort focused on the Medicaid program. WHA spending was up $101,670, nearly 31 percent, compared to the same period two years ago as the group got behind Gov. Tony Evers’ proposal to accept federal money to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.

Though GOP lawmakers rejected that approach, Borgerding said WHA’s goal was to persuade Republicans to embrace as many other Evers Medicaid provisions as possible.

Evers’ plan would’ve freed up $324 million in state money while drawing down federal dollars to invest in health care programs. Instead, Republicans invested an additional $588.2 million in general-purpose revenue into Medicaid to accomplish goals such as increasing reimbursement rates for health care providers.

“You had obviously a much more divided process this time,” Borgerding said. “That took a heck of a lot of time and effort to try and move the ball forward on Medicaid one way or another. It was a much different process.”

Lobbying reports covering the first six months of the year were due July 31, and as of noon Aug. 2, groups had reported to the Ethics Commission putting in more than 114,000 hours lobbying during the period. By comparison, groups dropped $18.6 million and 119,878 hours over the first six months of 2017 as Republicans became locked in a budget stalemate that dragged into September.

Over the past 14 years, spending peaked at $23.9 million in the first half of 2011 as the fight over Gov. Scott Walker’s Act 10 and his first budget raged. That topped the $20.5 million spent in the first half of 2009 as Dems enjoyed control of the governor’s office and full Legislature for the first time since the mid-1980s.

Lobbying expenses dropped then to nearly $17 million in the first half of 2017 and had been steadily climbing until the most recent six-month period.

The dip in spending from the previous budget cycle also comes as the pace of new laws has slowed dramatically compared to recent sessions. Just eight bills became law by June 30 of this year, compared to an average of nearly 26 over the previous decade.

WMC’s Scott Manley said the group’s focus during the first six months of 2019 was largely on opposing provisions in the governor’s budget.

That included the proposal Evers included that would’ve required property to be valued at its highest and best use to address the so-called “dark store” loophole. WMC has opposed such efforts, arguing they amount to a tax hike on businesses.

That accounted for 13% of its effort during the six-month period, as did seeking a fee schedule for the worker’s compensation program and beefing up workforce development.

The majority of the WMC’s work was categorized as minor efforts, each of which amounts to less than 10% of a group’s overall work.

“The threats to the business community that were in the governor’s budget sort of changed the focus of our advocacy,” Manley said.

Marsy’s Law put all its effort into a constitutional amendment to add rights for crime victims, as it did last session. Even though it ranked in the top three for dollars spent, the group’s 274 hours lobbying were well behind WMC’s 2,518 and WHA’s 2,197. Instead, the group’s efforts have largely gone to a paid media campaign that included radio and digital ads.

Under state law, paid advertising has to be included in reported expenses if it’s done to urge the public to push lawmakers on a legislative or administrative action.

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