

HFS Announces Upcoming Director Transition

by Jamie Munks
October 4 2023 3:32 PM



SPRINGFIELD – Director Theresa Eagleson, who has led the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services for the past five years, announced today that she will be leaving the Department at the end of 2023. The Governor has appointed Lizzy Whitehorn, who currently serves as First Assistant Deputy Governor for Health and Human Services, to serve as Director beginning January 1, 2024.

Under Eagleson’s leadership, HFS has implemented multiple nation-leading initiatives aimed at reducing disparities and creating more equitable healthcare and child support systems in Illinois. Eagleson championed the expansion of healthcare access, including behavioral healthcare and reproductive healthcare, and brought a new vision to the Department of improving lives and creating a more customer-centered way of providing healthcare and child support services to HFS customers.

“Theresa has dedicated countless hours of work and a lifetime of Medicaid and health care expertise to my administration over nearly five years. She has led with a passion to dramatically improve the program for the millions of Illinoisans served by Medicaid, and I am incredibly grateful for her years of service,” **said Governor JB Pritzker.** “Reforming the way the state pays nursing homes will forever transform the system and lives of thousands of Illinoisans.”

With Governor Pritzker’s strong support, Eagleson and the HFS team spent years advocating for better care for nursing home residents leading up to the passage of landmark, first-in-the-nation nursing home rate reforms which raised the floor for CNA wages and tied payment to staffing in 2022. For the first time, significant new funding for nursing homes is tied to the quality of care and levels of staffing that facilities provide to residents, which is aimed at creating better health outcomes. In the 15 months since Illinois began implementing these reforms, significant progress has been made toward realizing the goal of better care for nursing home residents across the state. The reforms include a new wage scale for certified nursing assistants and staffing levels at facilities across the state – a top indicator of health outcomes for residents – have been consistently increasing since the reforms took effect.

“IHCA greatly admires and respects Director Eagleson’s leadership in finally accomplishing much-needed nursing home rate reform,” **said Matt Hartman, President & CEO of the Illinois Health Care Association.** “This historic change prioritized quality, transparency and accountability as core principles to drive better resident outcomes while increasing Medicaid nursing home funding by almost \$700 million annually. The ideals that underpinned this historic effort are integral to IHCA’s principles and mission of service to those we care for, and we salute Director Eagleson for her efforts. Change is hard and her leadership made this innovative reform a reality. Thank you for your service to the citizens of Illinois who are in the greatest need.

Your contributions have made a lasting and positive difference.”

“Director Eagleson is the most productive and innovative leader of the Illinois Medicaid program that I have had the privilege of working with in my 40-year tenure,” **said Brian Cloch, a senior care industry leader.** “I commend Gov. Pritzker for appointing someone who came from the operating side. She will be missed.”

While leading HFS, Eagleson signed the first COVID home response contracts with three providers to bring care to individual homes and reduce need for hospitalizations. She also initiated, led work with the legislature to pass, and implemented an equity-driven Healthcare Transformation Collaboratives (HTC) program to fund innovative projects undertaken by partnerships among providers and community-based organizations that aim to reduce disparities in health care to create better health outcomes in some of the most distressed communities across the state. There are currently 15 HTCs funded in underserved communities around the state.

“Theresa’s leadership brought forth possibly the single greatest change in the health delivery structures through the HFS Healthcare Transformation Collaboratives,” **said Larry McCulley, President & CEO at Southern Illinois Health Care Foundation.** “Her vision is leading to improved access to services, nutrition support, community health workers, housing, and others approaches that is making health outcomes the center piece of how we care for our communities. We will look back on these decisions in the coming years and recognize her for making Illinois a healthier place to call home.”

“Throughout her career, Director Eagleson has been a fervent advocate for positive change,” **said Ollie Idowu, Illinois Primary Health Care Association President & CEO.** “Under her leadership, the Department of Healthcare and Family Services has elevated diversity, equity, and inclusion in its mission, advanced several initiatives to spur innovations and improve outcomes, and effectively led our healthcare system through the COVID-19 pandemic. Illinois is stronger and healthier because of her leadership. We wish Director Eagleson all the best in her future endeavors.”

During Eagleson’s time as HFS director, the Department implemented postpartum coverage for 12 months for all women, regardless of immigration status, making Illinois the first state in the nation to do so. HFS has also expanded access and coverage in a range of other areas: implementing children’s behavioral health reforms, gender-affirming care, stabilizing the network of Federally Qualified Health Centers, broadening choices in care for seniors with the launch of the Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE), and enhanced funding for and access to all forms of reproductive health care services.

HFS has also implemented new assessments for Managed Care Organizations (MCOs) and other provider assessments, which has made the Illinois Medicaid program less dependent on state funds, and has put in place rate increases for providers, and experienced growth in the number of providers who serve Medicaid customers.

“Director Eagleson has had such a positive impact on the Illinois Medicaid program and its members,” **said Kim Foltz, division president at Aetna Medicaid.** “Under her leadership, the program has implemented innovative solutions to better meet members where they are and provide them with access to the care they needed. The program is now a national leader in addressing health equity, the social determinants of members health and building relationships with quality providers that are essential for the delivery of quality care to Illinoisans.”

Prior to serving as HFS Director, Eagleson was the state’s longest serving Medicaid director – from 2007 to 2014, as well as the Executive Director of the University of Illinois’ System Office of Medicaid Innovation. Eagleson has served in policy and administrative positions in state government since 1990. From working as a policy advisor and budget analyst in the Edgar Administration, to beginning the Integrated Care pilot to deliver more coordinated Medicaid care under the Quinn Administration, to her work to give voice to Medicaid customers in Illinois nursing homes under this administration, Eagleson has served the state honorably for three decades and is known statewide and nationally as a Medicaid expert.

“Serving the people of Illinois, particularly the millions of customers within the Medicaid program, has been my life’s work, and an honor. I am so proud of the hard work Team HFS does every day on behalf of our customers, and we’ve accomplished many significant things together,” **Eagleson said.** “We’ve made great strides to compel nursing homes to staff better and provide higher quality care for residents, and we’ve worked with the Healthcare Transformation Collaboratives to create innovative solutions to bridge healthcare gaps that are tailored to individual communities.

“We made major operational pivots in the early days of the pandemic to ensure we were serving our customers in the best way possible, and now we are committed to keeping eligible Illinoisans covered by Medicaid as we unwind from the continuous coverage requirement of the public health emergency. It has been the honor of a lifetime to lead this wonderful team of professionals at HFS, and I am grateful to Gov. Pritzker for giving us the opportunity to create transformational change within the larger healthcare landscape in this state, especially for nursing home residents. I will always treasure these 30 years spent serving the state of Illinois.”

The Governor has already taken steps to ensure there will be a smooth leadership transition at HFS.

Whitehorn has served as First Assistant Deputy Governor for Health and Human Services since 2019. Alongside Deputy Governor Sol Flores, Whitehorn led the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including testing and vaccine efforts and the nation-leading rental assistance and childcare restoration grant programs. From the Governor's Office, she spearheaded the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative, a collaborative approach among six state agencies to improve services, resources, and outcomes for youth with significant behavioral health needs. Over the last five years, Whitehorn has worked closely on the administration's healthcare initiatives, including legislation to authorize a state-based healthcare exchange, increased access to healthcare services, and expanded programs supporting reproductive healthcare, as well as efforts to strengthen the state's early childhood system. Whitehorn is a committed public servant, who previously served as Deputy Director in the Department of Central Management Services and Associate General Counsel in the Governor's Office. Before joining the administration, Whitehorn served as a senior policy advisor on Governor Pritzker's campaign.

“Over the last four and a half years, I've worked closely with the health and human service agencies and seen firsthand the results of interagency cooperation and coordination—a healthier, stronger Illinois,” **said Whitehorn.** “I'm honored to continue this work at HFS to increase access to affordable and equitable healthcare and support the millions of Illinoisans who rely on our Medicaid system everyday.”