

Alternatives to Physicians

Alaska and Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs)

Alaska has a well-documented shortage of medical doctors.

HRSA tracks Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) by geographic area, population group, and health care facility.

HRSA reported that nationally only 47.55% primary medical, only 32.36% dental, and only 27.11% mental health needs were being met.

Alaska ranked 48th for primary medical needs being met (21.85%), 22nd for dental needs being met (34.98%), and 48th for mental health needs being met (11.90%).

Percent Needs Being Met	United States	Alaska
Primary Care	47.55%	21.85%
Dental	32.36%	34.98%
Mental Health	27.11%	11.90%

Alaska and Non-Physician Alternatives

Physician assistants, nurse practitioners, naturopaths, pharmacists, and other non-physician health care professionals each brings something unique and valuable to patient care.

Some advocate for expanding the scope of practice of non-physicians to solve Alaska's shortage of physicians.

Physician and non-physician training are different – different knowledge base, different skill mastery, and different clinical judgement.

Only physicians are required to complete structured clinical training after graduate school.

A physician has 7-11 years of training with 12,000-16,000 hours of supervised patient care prior to independent practice.

A physician assistant has 2-3 years of training with 2,000 hours of supervised patient care prior to licensure eligibility.

A nurse practitioner has 2-4 years of training with 500-750 hours of supervised patient care prior to independent practice.

A naturopath has 4 years of training with 720-1,200 hours of supervised clinical care prior to licensure eligibility.

How could trainees with 12,000, 2,000, 1,200, or 750 hours of supervised patient care experience have the same knowledge, skill, and judgement when transitioning to independent practice?

Profession	Length of graduate-level education	Years of residency/fellowship training	Total patient care hours required during training
Physician	4 years	3-7 years	12,000-16,000 hours
Physician Assistant	2-3 years	Not required	2,000 hours
Nurse Practitioner	2-4 years	Not required	500-750 hours
Naturopath	4 years	Not required	1,200 hours

AMA Scope of Practice: Education Matters. <https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/scope-practice/scope-practice-education-matters>

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Alaska Physician Demographics

In 2020, there were 2,101 active physicians in Alaska.

15.7% of Alaska's population is Alaska Native or Native American but only 2.1% of Alaska's physicians identify as Alaska Native or Native American.

Increasing the number of Alaska Native and Native American physicians requires increasing GME in Alaska.

In 2020, 34.2% of Alaska's physicians were 60 years or older.

12% of physicians retire before age 60 and 42% retire before age 65.

Alaska will not be able to recruit enough new physicians to replace retiring physicians to maintain current physician to population ratios.

Telemedicine

Telemedicine has been used in Alaska by health care organizations long before the COVID pandemic.

Telemedicine became a necessity during the pandemic.

Now, some Alaska health care organizations rely on telemedicine by physicians and non-physicians who have no first-hand knowledge or experience with Alaska's geography, cultures, climate, or systems of care.

Telemedicine is more than increasing access to care.

Poor quality telemedicine care is poor quality medical care.

Alaska has a history of well-intended out of state physicians and non-physicians who increase access to care but who do not provide follow up care, continuity of care, or coordination of care with patients' Alaska physicians and non-physicians.

Continuity and coordination of care are part of quality of care.

The ideal way to train high quality telemedicine care for Alaskans is during training in Alaska.