The role of nursing in addressing healthcare access, and the proposed
National APRN Nurse Compact

April 27, 2021

Newark, DE - According to the 2019 Primary Care Collaborative Report, Delaware does not currently have enough capacity in its primary care system to meet the needs of its population. This gap is only expected to widen as the population ages, providers leave or downsize their practices, and a scarcity of new providers is available to fill the gap.

In 2017, there were 691 primary care physicians practicing in the State of Delaware. The most practitioners were found in New Castle (469), followed by Sussex (140), and Kent (82). These data suggest that, overall, Delaware has a patient to provider ratio of 1,390 Delaware residents to 1 provider. While this ratio is in the 90th percentile of patient to physician ratios overall, the data shows striking differences when broken down by county (see Table 1).

Table 1. Delaware primary care physician data by county

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Care Physicians</th>
<th>Patient to Provider Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kent County</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Castle County</td>
<td>469</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sussex County</td>
<td>140</td>
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Fortunately, physicians are not the only people providing primary healthcare in Delaware. According to the Delaware Department of State, Division of Professional Regulation, there are currently 623 physician assistants in Delaware, more than 20,583 registered nurses, and over 2,438 nurse practitioners. These non-physician healthcare providers help to fill the gap in Delawarean’s access to primary health care.

The population of Delaware is approximately 990,000. Of these, New Castle has a year-round population of 559,335 people (57.83% of the population), 178,550 (18.46%) live in Kent, and 229,286 (23.71%) live in Sussex County. Since 2010, all three counties have experienced considerable population growth, the largest of which was seen in Sussex (increased 23.25% from 2010). The proportion of people in Delaware over the age of 65 is expected to increase faster than the overall population, which will put additional stress on an already taxed system.

Due to Delaware’s small size, and its position between major healthcare institutions in Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, individuals have entered and left Delaware to receive healthcare, either due to emergency, the need for specialty care, or even vacation. Up until recently, crossing the
border meant either having a primary care physician in the state, or postponing health care until an individual’s return to their home state.

Healthcare access is only one of the Social Determinants of Health, but it is also easily modifiable on a larger scale. The movement of individuals across state borders, as well as areas within Delaware with healthcare provider shortages, highlights the need for an increased number of individuals providing healthcare in Delaware. Permitting healthcare providers to hold a multi-state license to practice could increase the number of providers eligible to provide primary healthcare in Delaware, and allow patients the consistency of seeing their primary care provider for health-related issues, no matter their geographical location.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the very nature of geography as a barrier into sharp focus. Patients residing in a state different from their primary care practice may face barriers to tele-health services due to the licensure of one state not allowing patients to be seen – or billed – in a different state. Thus, it is essential that for primary care and urgent care needs, models be developed for cross-state licensure, while allowing states to themselves determine scope of practice. This would separate the licensure aspect (‘ability to practice’) from that of privileging or scope (‘what to practice’).

The Delaware Academy of Medicine/Delaware Public Health Association reaffirms health as a human right and is committed to advancing access and improving health for all Delawareans.

References