Nursing Across the State

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Nursing care workers in a fast-growing industry

It will come as no surprise to anyone that nursing occupations and the health care industry are among the fastest growing occupations and industries in the state.

An aging Alaska population, technical changes that are boosting the demand for health care services and more in-state health care options are among the reasons for the industry’s surge. By 2016, Alaska is projected to have about 30 percent more jobs related to nursing services than in 2006 while health care as an industry is expected to add 25 percent more jobs over the same period.

One of the fastest growing groups of occupations in one of Alaska’s fastest growing industries deserves a closer look.

Who are we talking about?

When most people think of nurses, they think of registered nurses. This article will look not only at RNs, but at other workers who provide nursing-related services as well. (Federal nursing care workers aren’t included in the data used for this article.) The group is made up of registered nurses (including RNs with specialized training such as nurse practitioners and nurse anesthetists), nursing instructors and teachers, licensed practical nurses (LPNs), and nursing aides, orderlies and attendants (those with certification are often referred to as Certified Nurse Assistants or CNAs).

In 2008, there were 5,512 RNs, 2,559 CNAs, 684 LPNs and 62 nursing instructors and teachers in Alaska. More than 5,100, about 58 percent, of those workers were in the Anchorage/Mat-Su area. The Gulf Coast, Interior and Southeast regions each had between 10.7 percent and 13.2 percent of the total while the Southwest and Northern regions had about 3 percent each. (See Exhibit 6.)

RNs make up more than 62 percent of the state’s total, but not all RNs began as RNs. The CNA program is often an entry point for LPNs and RNs. Some LPNs later become RNs and many of the state’s instructors are drawn from the RN pool. There’s a clear path from entry-level positions to higher levels of nursing that can be achieved with experience and continuing education.

Gender

Almost 90 percent of nursing care workers in Alaska of known gender are female. That figure holds true for every region of the state. According to a 2000 national survey, Alaska’s 10 percent for males is about twice the national average. Almost 95 percent of Alaska’s nursing instructors are female. (See Exhibit 6.)

How the Ages Break Down

Alaska’s nursing-related workers, 2008

Note: This exhibit covers only workers whose age is known.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

1 “Nursing-related” is used interchangeably with “nursing care” throughout this article.

2 This number is shown in the nursing aides, orderlies and attendants occupation category on Exhibit 6. The category includes CNAs.
Age

The average age – where age is known – of the nursing-related workers in 2008 was 43.3 years. The average age for CNAs was 37; for instructors it was 53. Both RNs and LPNs had an average age of 46. There was little age difference between the sexes. The Southwest region had the oldest average age of 46 years, while workers in the Northern region were the youngest, averaging about 41 years old. Almost 30 percent of nursing care workers statewide were between 45 and 54, and more than half the total were older than 45. (See Exhibit 1.)

Location

The statewide ratio of nursing care workers to residents was one to every 77 residents. The Southeast region had the highest ratio with one for every 60 residents while Southwest has the lowest with one per 133 people. (See Exhibit 2.)

Alaska’s Southwest region led all other regions with its percentage of RNs to all nursing-related workers – 73 percent. The Northern and Southeast regions trailed other regions with about 51 percent RNs each.

The Northern region had the highest percentage of LPNs at 18.5 percent and Southeast’s nearly 42 percent was highest for CNAs.

Different areas have different types of facilities and staffing needs. Three of the state’s six Pioneer Homes are in Southeast Alaska, and that may account for the region’s high percentage of CNAs. Long-term care facilities are able to use more nursing assistants working under the supervision of RNs or other trained professionals.

Wages

The group as a whole earned $380 million in total annual wages during 2008. That includes wages for both nursing and non-nursing-related work. More than 90 percent of the total was earned doing nursing-related work. Not surprisingly, those with specialized areas of expertise and certification had the highest average annual wages. (See Exhibit 3.)

RNs earned about three-quarters of the group’s total wages and also earned the highest percentage of their wages from nursing-related work. RNs earned 94 percent from nursing-related work, compared to instructors and CNAs who earned 75 and 78 percent respectively. More
modestly paid CNAs were likely supplementing their nursing-related wages with work outside of health care.

### Residency

More than 7,000, about 80 percent of the group, claimed Alaska as their state of residence. The percentage was highest for CNAs who often are recruited, trained and work in their home communities. (See Exhibit 6.)

Alaska health providers satisfy some of their nursing personnel needs by recruiting from outside the state and by hiring traveling registered nurses. How many of those nurses are hired varies with location, area of specialization and level of expertise. Some of these recruited nurses choose to stay in the state and become permanent residents.

### Licensing

Alaska has made great strides toward increasing the in-state training capacity for nursing-related jobs. New rural training facilities are opening each year, charged with training people in rural communities on the basics they need to get a license and work in their communities.

RNs practicing in the state must hold an Alaska license. Twenty-two states (with one more pending) have joined in an agreement that allows their licenses to be interchangeable among the member states. Alaska isn't part of that group. Nurses from out of state must first get an Alaska license to begin work.4

There were 12,830 individuals with a nursing license in Alaska in 2008. However, only 67.6

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1 These are ranges that a company’s or organization’s specific employment falls into; the ranking is based on the specific employment number.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

3 Most of Banner Health’s Alaska jobs are at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital.

4 Some discrepancies between worker counts and licensees may be the result of incorrect occupational coding or differences in the two data sets, preventing an exact match.
## A Look at People and Their Nursing-Related Jobs

**Alaska, 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2008</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People in nursing-related occupations</td>
<td>8,817</td>
<td>6,636</td>
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<td>258</td>
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<td>7,217</td>
<td>80.4%</td>
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### Occupation

- **Nursing instructors and teachers**
- **Registered Nurses**
- **Licensed Practical Nurses**
- **Nursing aides, orderlies and attendants**

### Gender

- **Male**
- **Female**
- **Unknown**

### Age Group

- **18 to 24**
- **25 to 34**
- **35 to 44**
- **45 to 54**
- **55 to 64**
- **65 to 74**
- **75+**
- **Unknown Age**

### Region

- **Anchorage and Mat-Su**
- **Gulf Coast**
- **Interior**
- **Northern**
- **Southeast**
- **Southwest**
- **Outside Alaska**

### Industry

- **Health care**
- **State government**
- **Local government**
- **Administrative**
- **Other services**
- **Professional, scientific and technical services**
- **All other industries**

### License Type

- **Licensed**
- **Advanced Nurse Practitioner**
- **Certified Nurse Aide**
- **Licensed Practical Nurse**
- **Registered Nurse**
- **Registered Nurse Anesthetist**
- **Temporary Certified Nurse Aide**
- **Temporary Licensed Practical Nurse**
- **Temporary Registered Nurse**
- **Unlicensed**

### Movement between rural and urban areas, 2003 to 2008

- **Did not move**
- **Moved**

### Sources

- Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section; Alaska Department of Revenue, Permanent Fund Dividend Division; Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development, Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing.
percent of them were working in wage and salary employment that year. Some of them might have been working in jobs that aren’t covered by unemployment insurance, such as independent contractors, so they weren’t included in the data used for the count.\(^5\)

**Full time**

One of the appeals of nursing as an occupation is that – especially for those with advanced skills and experience – it affords flexibility for employees to work when and where they want. That means that working part time is a possibility and many from the nursing care group take advantage of that option. Health care providers are willing to accommodate employees’ wants and needs in order to staff their facilities.

About 64 percent of Alaska’s nursing care workers were employed full time in 2008. Work was considered full time for this report when wages were reported in all four quarters of a calendar year. Sixty-nine percent of RNs worked full time. At the other end of the range, 53 percent of CNAs worked in all four quarters. (See Exhibit 6.)

More than 65 percent of the nursing care group in Gulf Coast, Southeast and Anchorage/Mat-Su and 61 percent from Interior worked full time, while Southwest and Northern trailed the other regions with 50 and 43 percent respectively.

**Rural/urban**

A 2007 University of Alaska health work force vacancy study found the highest vacancy rates for health care workers in the Northwest and Southwest parts of the state. Those areas are primarily rural and don’t include any of the state’s larger urban areas.

From 2003 to 2008, about the same number of nursing care workers moved from Alaska’s urban areas to rural areas (112), as moved from rural areas to urban (125).

However, looking at the percentage of each area’s total nursing care workers, a larger percentage moved from rural areas to urban areas than vice versa. During the six-year period, the 112 who moved from the urban areas to rural areas represented 1.7 percent of the urban areas’ 6,650 nursing care workers. The 125 who moved from rural areas to urban areas represented 7.5 percent of the rural areas’ 1,675 nursing care workers.

**Conclusion**

Openings for nursing-related occupations in Alaska range from those requiring entry-level certification and training to those requiring higher degrees and advanced training. The opportunities for entry and advancement have helped make nursing-related jobs high-growth occupations in a high-growth industry.

Alaska has added more than 600 nursing-related workers to its wage and salary employment over the 2003 to 2008 period. The number of people in nursing occupations is forecasted to continue to climb upward for the foreseeable future. Continuing growth in nursing-related occupations, as well as the health care industry in general, offer an excellent outlook for those looking to enter the field.

**Methodology**

Worker numbers and income data used for this article are from the Occupational Database. ODB contains occupation and place of work information on each wage and salary worker covered by unemployment insurance employed in Alaska. Resident information is based on matching addresses from Alaska Permanent Fund dividend applications to ODB data.

The data set used in this report consists of an unduplicated collection of wage records. In cases where workers had more than one job or worked in more than one geographic area, their employment and wages were assigned to the industry, employer and area where they earned the majority of their wages in 2008.

The Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development wage file includes only those workers covered by Alaska unemployment insurance. Therefore, information wasn’t available for self-employed workers or federal government employees.

\(^5\) See the Methodology box, this page.