

## Nursing care workers in a fast-growing industry

**I**t 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<sup>1</sup> services as well. (Federal nursing

<sup>1</sup> "Nursing-related" is used interchangeably with "nursing care" throughout this article.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.)

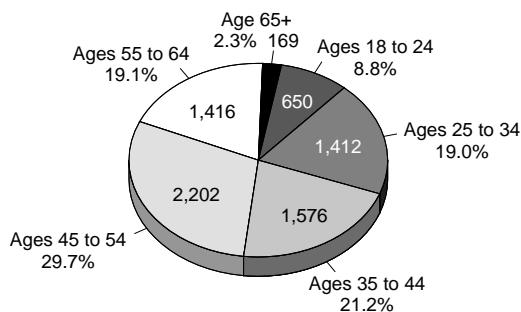
RNs make up more than 62 percent of the state's total, but not all RNs began as RNs. The CNA program is often an entry point for LPNs and RNs. Some LPNs later become RNs and many of the state's instructors are drawn from the RN pool. There's a clear path from entry-level positions to higher levels of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

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

## 1 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

## 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

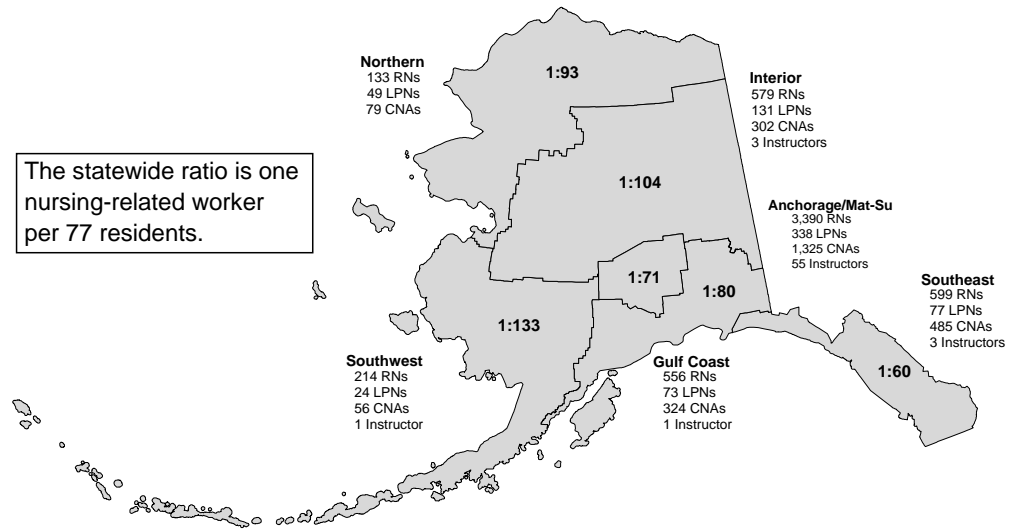
The statewide ratio of nursing care workers to residents was one to every 77 residents. The Southeast region had the highest ratio with one for every 60 residents while Southwest has the lowest with one per 133 people. (See Exhibit 2.)

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.

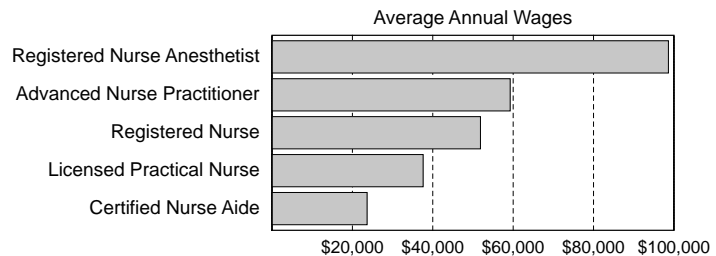
Different areas have different types of facilities and staffing needs. Three of the state's six Pioneer Homes are in Southeast Alaska, and that may account for the region's high percentage of CNAs. Long-term care facilities are able to use more nursing assistants working under the supervision of RNs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

## Ratio of Nursing Care Workers to Residents By region, Alaska 2008 **2**



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

## Average Wages by License Type Alaska's nursing-related workers, 2008 **3**



Note: This exhibit shows only wages for nursing-related jobs; the wages from the workers' other jobs aren't included.

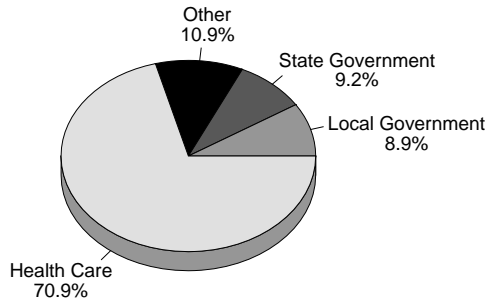
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

## 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

## 4 Industries Where They Work Alaska's nursing-related workers, 2008



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

## 5 Top Employers Alaska's nursing-related jobs, 2008

	Number of Employees <sup>1</sup>	Headquarters or Largest Worksite
Providence Health & Services	2,000 to 2,250	Anchorage
State of Alaska	750 to 1,000	—
Alaska Regional Hospital	500 to 750	Anchorage
Banner Health (mostly Fairbanks Memorial Hospital)	"	Fairbanks
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium	250 to 500	Anchorage
Mat-Su Regional Medical Center	"	Mat-Su
Central Peninsula General Hospital	"	Soldotna

Note: Five of these employers were among Alaska's 100 largest private-sector employers in 2008. For more information, see the *Trends 100* in *Trends*' July 2009 issue.

<sup>1</sup> 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

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.

### Industry

More than 70 percent of all the nursing-related employees worked in the health care and social assistance industry in 2008. Another 18 percent worked in state and local government facilities, split roughly equally between the government branches. About 6 percent worked for agencies that provide temporary and traveling nurses and the balance was in other industries, with each major industry claiming at least one nursing-related worker. (See Exhibit 4.)

### Largest employers

The four largest employers of nursing care staff in 2008 were Providence Health & Services, the State of Alaska, Alaska Regional Hospital and Banner Health.<sup>3</sup> Providence employed more than the next three combined and together the four accounted for almost half of the state's nursing care workers. (See Exhibit 5.)

Employers report shortages, especially in areas that require highly experienced RNs and in positions that require a high level of specialized training.

### 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> Most of Banner Health's Alaska jobs are at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

# 6 A Look at People and Their Nursing-Related Jobs Alaska, 2008

	2008							2008				
	Total	Female	Male	Worked All Four Quarters	Nursing Wages	Average Nursing Wages	Total Wages <sup>1</sup>	Average Total Wages <sup>2</sup>	Moved Between Rural and Urban, <sup>3</sup> 2003 to 2008	Worked in Rural Area	Worked in Urban Area	Percentage Alaska Resident
People in nursing-related occupations	8,817	6,636	790	5,643	\$345,839,808	\$39,224	\$379,896,698	\$43,087	258	1,718	7,217	80.4%
<b>Occupation</b>												
Nursing instructors and teachers	62	52	3	36	\$2,304,787	\$37,174	\$3,073,772	\$49,577	1	2	60	87.1%
Registered Nurses	5,512	4,038	417	3,802	\$267,239,348	\$48,483	\$282,957,581	\$51,335	207	990	4,620	77.1%
Licensed Practical Nurses	684	481	67	441	\$24,874,914	\$36,367	\$27,554,263	\$40,284	24	154	541	76.3%
Nursing aides, orderlies and attendants	2,559	2,065	303	1,364	\$51,420,760	\$20,094	\$66,311,082	\$25,913	26	572	1,996	88.6%
<b>Gender</b>												
Male	790	0	790	531	\$34,155,754	\$43,235	\$38,844,471	\$49,170	51	136	680	92.2%
Female	6,636	6,636	0	4,726	\$269,091,746	\$40,550	\$295,797,816	\$44,575	162	1,236	5,471	95.8%
Unknown	1,391	0	0	386	\$42,592,309	\$30,620	\$45,254,412	\$32,534	45	346	1066	0.4%
<b>Age Group</b>												
18 to 24	650	77	572	254	\$10,173,272	\$15,651	\$13,343,412	\$20,528	11	117	536	92.9%
25 to 34	1,412	136	1,276	914	\$46,472,005	\$32,912	\$52,102,614	\$36,900	28	228	1194	95.0%
35 to 44	1,576	194	1,379	1,140	\$65,811,235	\$41,758	\$73,409,904	\$46,580	58	278	1318	95.3%
45 to 54	2,202	223	1,972	1,718	\$105,198,769	\$47,774	\$114,857,874	\$52,161	70	426	1813	96.3%
55 to 64	1,416	149	1,262	1,103	\$68,791,202	\$48,581	\$73,599,914	\$51,977	44	286	1156	95.2%
65 to 74	169	10	157	124	\$6,791,439	\$40,186	\$7,317,977	\$43,302	2	39	131	95.3%
75+	13	1	12	10	\$542,173	\$41,706	\$551,899	\$42,454	0	2	11	84.6%
Unknown Age	1,379	0	6	380	\$42,059,713	\$30,500	\$44,713,104	\$32,424	45	342	1058	0.4%
<b>Region</b>												
Anchorage and Mat-Su	5,146	487	3,891	3,359	\$210,893,936	\$40,982	\$231,155,486	\$44,919	100	0	5,146	81.7%
Gulf Coast	943	74	755	634	\$33,820,530	\$35,865	\$36,913,841	\$39,145	43	943	41	84.6%
Interior	1,008	78	786	617	\$35,521,581	\$35,240	\$39,089,511	\$38,779	19	17	998	81.7%
Northern	254	16	147	108	\$9,441,905	\$37,173	\$10,397,070	\$40,933	16	254	14	57.5%
Southeast	1,160	110	886	777	\$40,832,718	\$35,201	\$45,535,851	\$39,255	35	198	979	81.8%
Southwest	295	25	170	147	\$15,052,265	\$51,025	\$16,528,065	\$56,027	45	295	39	58.6%
Outside Alaska	11	0	1	1	\$276,874	\$25,170	\$276,874	\$25,170	0	11	0	0.0%
<b>Industry</b>												
Health care	6,255	4,889	571	4,264	\$263,323,648	\$42,098	\$285,820,827	\$45,695	168	1,125	5208	83.5%
State government	810	686	88	611	\$33,234,214	\$41,030	\$36,112,868	\$44,584	28	71	744	93.0%
Local government	789	657	57	544	\$27,902,154	\$35,364	\$31,050,256	\$39,354	16	314	485	86.8%
Administrative	556	102	24	95	\$13,547,701	\$24,366	\$14,333,106	\$25,779	33	127	452	18.0%
Other services	66	43	3	25	\$2,004,667	\$30,374	\$2,545,854	\$38,574	1	33	34	65.2%
Professional, scientific and technical services	56	44	5	28	\$1,880,397	\$33,579	\$2,329,204	\$41,593	1	2	54	87.5%
All other industries	285	215	42	76	\$3,947,027	\$13,849	\$7,704,584	\$27,034	11	46	240	85.3%
<b>License Type</b>												
Licensed	6,953	5,554	579	5,132	\$311,221,467	\$44,761	\$333,650,403	\$47,987	249	1,325	5,744	85.0%
Advanced Nurse Practitioner	232	200	10	161	\$13,747,428	\$59,256	\$16,116,469	\$69,468	12	53	186	86.6%
Certified Nurse Aide	1,428	1,256	140	1,004	\$33,789,560	\$23,662	\$40,743,088	\$28,532	22	319	1,117	95.4%
Licensed Practical Nurse	630	486	61	455	\$23,685,428	\$37,596	\$25,744,665	\$40,865	31	135	513	83.8%
Registered Nurse	4,545	3,548	356	3,481	\$235,699,948	\$51,859	\$246,311,835	\$54,194	182	787	3,840	82.5%
Registered Nurse Anesthetist	28	12	6	17	\$2,761,544	\$98,627	\$2,761,544	\$98,627	1	6	22	64.3%
Temporary Certified Nurse Aide	50	39	4	9	\$658,556	\$13,171	\$978,357	\$19,567	0	16	34	78.0%
Temporary Licensed Practical Nurse	9	4	0	1	\$182,057	\$20,229	\$200,904	\$22,323	0	4	5	44.4%
Temporary Registered Nurse	31	9	2	4	\$696,946	\$22,482	\$793,540	\$25,598	1	5	27	35.5%
Unlicensed	1,864	1,082	211	511	\$34,618,342	\$18,572	\$46,246,296	\$24,810	9	393	1,473	63.4%
<b>Movement between rural and urban areas, 2003 to 2008<sup>3</sup></b>												
Did not move	8,559	6,474	739	5,461	\$332,713,302	\$38,873	\$365,672,561	\$42,724	0	1,589	6,970	80.5%
Moved	258	162	51	182	\$13,126,506	\$50,878	\$14,224,138	\$55,132	258	129	247	78.7%
All of the health care industry	42,391	29,385	8,469	29,907	\$263,323,648	\$6,212	\$1,480,877,818	\$34,934	2,449	10,366	32,887	84.9%

<sup>1</sup> This column shows the wages people earned from nursing-related jobs, plus the wages they earned from any other jobs.

<sup>2</sup> This column is an average based on the Total Wages column to the immediate left.

<sup>3</sup> In cases where the working location was changed

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.<sup>5</sup>

## 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 per-

centage 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.

<sup>5</sup> See the Methodology box, this page.