

Is There A Nurse In The House?

By Cristina Klein

Probably not — Alaska is experiencing its share of a nationwide nursing shortage—a shortage which demonstrates the interrelationship of occupational supply and demand.

The nationwide nursing shortage began in 1986 when demand outpaced the supply of 1.6 million registered nurses. Registered nurses include those with bachelors of science in nursing (BSN) degrees and associate degrees who have passed a licensing exam. In Alaska, the shortage exists primarily in rural areas and in specialized hospital programs like critical care and obstetrics.

Demand Is Outpacing Supply, With No Relief In Sight

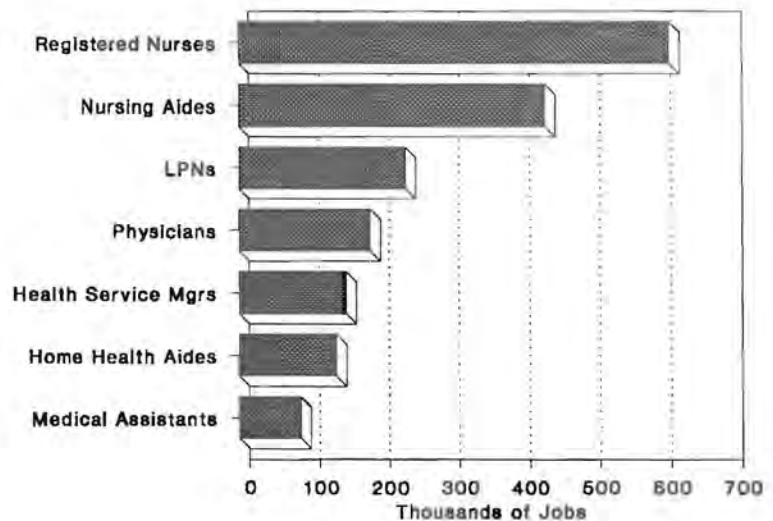
The number of nurses has grown slowly but steadily, doubling in the last 30 years. However, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) 1988 estimates, there were 117,000 vacant nursing positions in hospitals and 21,000 vacant positions in nursing homes nationwide. At the beginning of 1987, 83% of the nation's hospitals reported nursing shortages. Eighteen percent of large urban and nine percent of rural hospitals had to close understaffed wards. Meanwhile, occupational projections for the health care industry show no signs of a slowdown in the demand for nurses through the year 2000. (See Figure 1 & inset on page 8.)

Compensation & Working Conditions are Among the Reasons for the Shortage

The nursing shortage has been extensively analyzed and there are several commonly accepted reasons for the shortage. The following reasons are most often cited when explaining the nursing shortage in the United States' and the Alaskan labor markets:

- *Expanding Career Choices for Women*—Women, who traditionally

Figure 1
Health Occupations With The Most New Jobs, U.S., 1986-2000



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Why Is The Demand For Nurses Increasing So Quickly?

Health care is becoming more diverse. The growth of HMOs (Health Maintenance Organizations) and community based and out-patient services like home health, ambulatory and preventive care have increased the demand for RNs.

The population is aging. RNs are needed in a variety of convalescent and extended care facilities that rely on sophisticated equipment and treatments. An American Association of Retired Persons study in 1987 shows that 31% of all health care expenditures are provided to Medicare recipients who are 65 or older, although the U.S. Census Bureau figures show that people over 65 made up 11% of the 1980 population. Health care services for the elderly are expected to increase well into the 21st century when postwar "baby boomers" reach retirement age.

The AIDS epidemic has created a need for specially trained nurses to deal with the increasing number of seriously ill patients.

Cost containment moves, like DRGs (Diagnostic Related Groups) and Medicare legislation are putting pressure on patients to leave hospitals quickly. Treatment is intensified, requiring more nursing care.

Health care technology is changing. Medical care is rapidly becoming a 1950s science fiction fantasy of costly, technologically complex equipment and treatments. Specially trained RNs, more cost effective than MDs, are needed to operate this equipment and to administer treatment.

Management options now exist for nurses. RNs are needed in risk management, quality assurance, and vocational rehabilitation programs.

have made up a high percentage of the nursing profession, now have more career options. Mobility and job availability, two attractions to nursing, are being eclipsed by other job opportunities which offer women better wages and more advancement.

- *Compensation* – Nursing salaries plateau after 6-8 years and benefits are usually limited. These two factors drive nurses into other employment.
- *Working Conditions* – Are often difficult because of irregular hours, perennial understaffing, and lack of authority; these drawbacks are more significant now that there are greater career options for women, including the option of becoming the physician.
- *Changing Roles for Nurses* – The cost effective use of RNs for a wide variety of technical and administrative responsibilities has dramatically increased the demand for RNs.

In Alaska, Experienced Rural Nurses Are in Shortest Supply

In Alaska, the shortage is, in part, a lack of experienced RNs to work in rural areas. These rural positions require experienced nurses who can work without supervision in isolated locations with few amenities.

There is an overall vacancy rate at private Alaska hospitals of about 6-7%, slightly lower than the national average which, in April 1988, was 7.6%. Like hospitals in the rest of the U.S., Alaska hospitals have acute nursing shortages in wards that require specialized training, like critical care and obstetrics.

A Typical Alaskan Nurse- Urban, White, & Working in a Hospital

In 1988, the Alaska Department of Commerce, Division of Occupational Licensing, sent out a nursing survey with license renewal forms to all nurses licensed in Alaska. In the summer of

1989, the Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis staff compiled and analyzed these data.

A total of 4,431 of the 5,147 nurses licensed in Alaska responded to the survey (86% response). However, the total number of licensed nurses includes more than 600 new RN and Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) applicants in 1989 who would not be included in a licensing renewal survey. Other licensed nurses may have moved permanently out of Alaska and therefore did not renew their licenses.

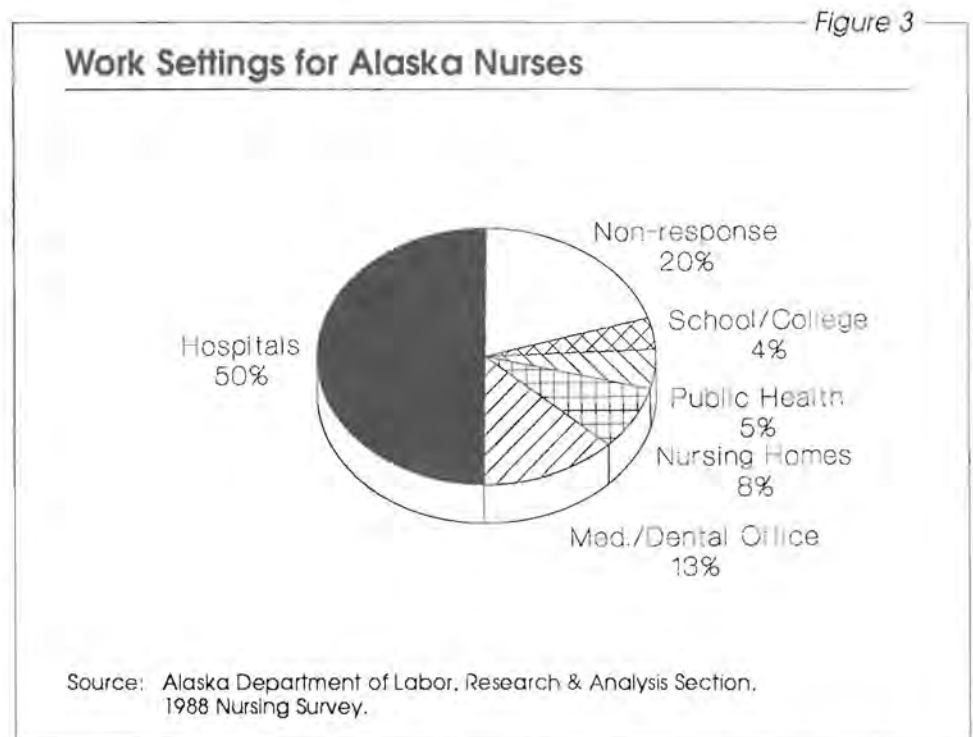
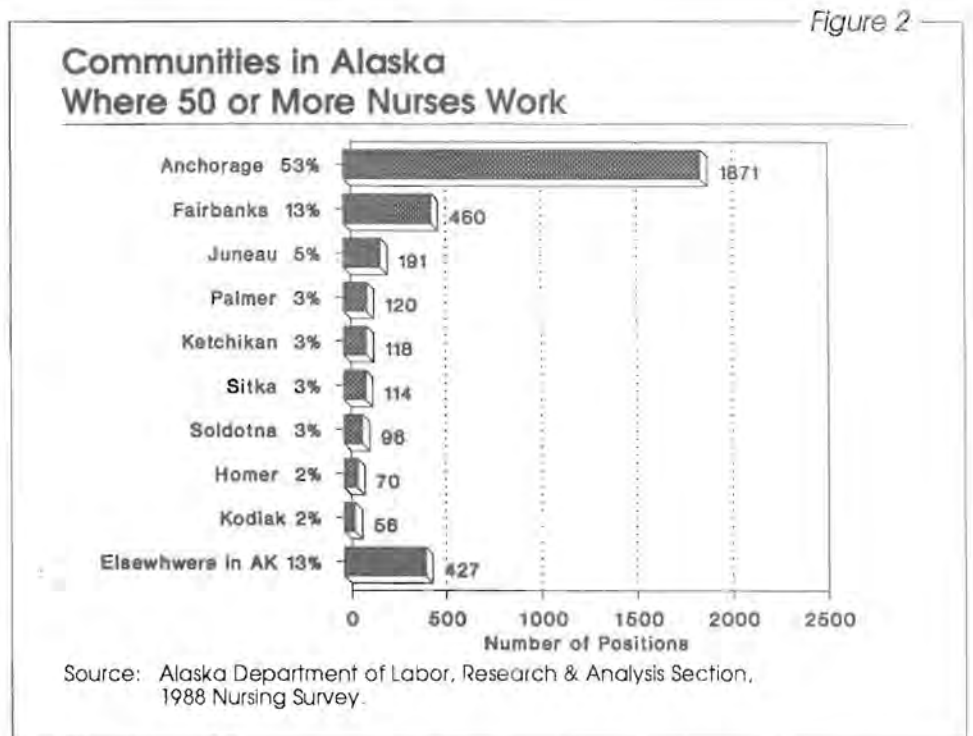
Of the nurses responding, there were 3,808 RNs (86%) and 589 LPNs (13%). Thirty-four nurses did not specify what type of license they hold. Eighty percent (3,523) of these nurses are living in Alaska. The remainder are living throughout the U.S. and in other countries. Of those nurses who are living and working in Alaska, more than 50% work in a hospital, and 53% of all respondents reported living in Anchorage. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

Of those responding, Alaskan Natives and other minorities represented less than 10% of the nurses in Alaska. Only 65 respondents were Alaskan Natives, 1.5% of the total. Of these, 46 are working in the nursing field and nine are working in rural areas of Alaska.

Ninety-one percent of the nurses living in Alaska are working either full-time (67%) or part-time (33%) in the nursing field. According to a 1988 survey conducted by the American Nursing Association, about 80% of licensed nurses in the U.S. are working in the nursing field. This means that there is an even smaller pool of nurses available for employment in Alaska than there is elsewhere in the U.S.

Why Are Licensed Nurses Choosing Not to Nurse? Family and Low Salaries Among the Reasons

To gain insight into what makes licensed nurses choose not to nurse, the responses of 151 licensed nurses who were not nursing were analyzed. (See Figure 4.) The leading cause for nurses not nursing was family or other personal priorities which kept them



from taking a nursing job. Child-rearing and care of other relatives were often factors. Salaries or working conditions which were unacceptable were listed as the second and third leading causes for nurses not working in nursing.

Large Hospitals, Public Sector Provide Many Nursing Jobs in Alaska

Of those nurses who are working, many are employed in large private hospitals or by the public sector. State and federal government account for a total of 670 nursing positions in Alaska. According to the Division of Personnel, the State of Alaska has 277 nurse and public health nurse positions. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Division of Public Health, has 101 public health nurse positions and the federal Indian Health Service has 292 positions.

Job openings for nursing positions occur regularly. Between July 1988 and June 1989, the Alaska Employment Service received job orders for 112 RNs. Since many RNs go directly to hospitals and public health agencies when looking for employment, the actual number of job openings for RNs in the state was higher than this figure.

Average Hourly Wages - \$12.12 for LPNs \$15.61 for RNs

The Alaska Department of Labor conducts an annual wage rate study and published the results in *Alaska Wage Rates for Selected Occupations*,

1989. The wage rate survey sampled the employers of approximately 12% of nurses working in Alaska. The average wage rates for RNs and LPNs in Alaska and six geographic regions of the state are shown in Table 1.

Nursing Education in Alaska - Addressing the Need for Nurses

The University of Alaska, unlike universities in the rest of the U.S., has experienced full enrollment in its nursing programs for several years. Each year, between 45 and 50 nursing students graduate. Some of these students do course work in Fairbanks and complete their degree at University of Alaska, Anchorage (UAA).

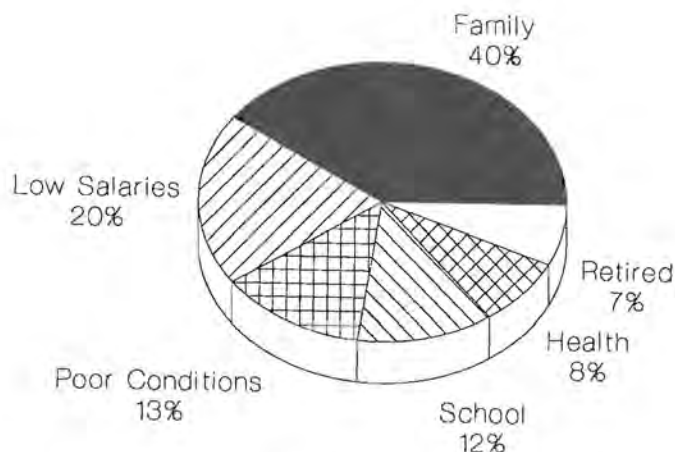
The graduate nursing program has three masters in science specialties (family nurse practitioner, community health, psychiatric mental health) and graduates ten to fourteen students each year. And the UAA College of Career and Vocational Education graduates about 30-38 nurses annually with associate degrees. There is a two year waiting list for entrance to this program.

In response to the shortage in rural areas, Kuskokwim College in Bethel has started a nursing preparatory program on a three year grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Nursing, Special Projects Grant Program. Eleven to twelve students a year are expected to take preparatory courses which they will complete with an associate nursing degree at the UAA College of Career and Vocational Education.

Because of a lack of clinical settings in which nurses can receive training, there is a limit to the number of registered nurses who can be trained in Alaska. There is a particular shortage of pediatric clinical settings in the state. Therefore, the number of registered nurses graduating from Alaska nursing programs cannot keep up with a growing demand — a demand which partially stems from the opening of new facilities like long term care centers.

Figure 4

Reasons Alaska Nurses Are Not Practicing



Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research & Analysis Section, 1988 Nursing Survey.

Competing for Nurses - Employers Offering Higher Pay, Incentives

The effects of more competition for the nurses that are available are manifesting themselves in the Alaskan labor market. For example, the Alaska Department of Administration, Division of Personnel, raised the salaries for fifteen nursing job classes as of July 1, 1989.

Private hospitals have been offering a variety of incentives to attract nurses. These incentives include new employee bonuses, moving expenses, referral bonuses, increased benefits, payback of student loans, increased salaries and direct reimbursements to nurses for tuition costs. Hospitals have also advertised out of state and have attempted to hire foreign, particularly Canadian, nurses.

Varied Solutions Offered to Solve Alaska's Nurse Shortage

Other states are beginning to address the nursing shortage, and some of these solutions may be models for Alaska to follow. At least twenty-seven states have passed, or are considering, legislation to address the nursing shortage. Legislation and programs include accelerated forgiveness of student loans, scholarship programs, the development of community health corps, collective bargaining for nurses, child care, task forces to look into the shortage, and increased pay and benefits.

Nursing directors and administrators, teaching professionals, and others studying the nursing shortage in Alaska, make the following recommendations to solve the nursing shortage in Alaska:

- To keep experienced nurses in the field, (particularly in hospitals where nurses complain of poor conditions as well as inadequate pay): Increase pay and benefits and give nurses more authority.
- To attract new entrants to the field: Increase pay and benefits and offer state sponsored forgiveness programs for student loans.

- To increase the level of training: Offer forgiveness programs for student loans and reimbursements for out-of-state tuition. LPNs could be encouraged to go back for their associate degree, and students with associate degrees could be encouraged to go back for their B.S. degrees.
- To deal with the shortage of nursing programs and clinical settings in Alaska: Form joint ventures with other universities which have access to clinical facilities, particularly pediatric sites. Students could be encouraged to return to Alaska with incentives like student loan forgiveness and bonuses. Increase funding of UAA nursing programs which are losing faculty to other, better paying positions.
- To attract rural residents: Offer special preparatory training like the training offered in the pilot program by Kuskokwim Community College. Grants for living in Anchorage and special tutoring would make the transition from the bush to Anchorage for study more attractive.
- To attract nurses to jobs where there is a chronic shortage, such as intensive care and newborn care: Increase pay for these jobs in relation to other nursing fields and offer tuition reimbursements for training in these fields.
- To attract nurses to Alaska: Provide nurses in other areas with information about nursing opportunities and about Alaskan communities, as well as providing financial incentives and moving costs.

Table 1

Average Hourly Wage - RNs & LPNs 1988-89

Region	Registered Nurses		Licensed Practical Nurses	
	July 1988	July 1989	July 1988	July 1989
Statewide	\$14.71	\$15.61	\$12.33	\$12.12
Anchorage/Mat-Su	13.66	14.67	11.45	12.17
Interior	13.96	13.68	10.44	10.85
Southeast	15.77	17.40	13.06	12.68
Gulf Coast	13.92	16.88	13.21	12.87
Southwest	17.25	14.48	N/A	N/A
Northern	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research & Analysis

Summary

Alaska's nursing shortage is unique for several reasons: UAA does not graduate enough nursing students to meet Alaska's growing needs; there are hard to fill rural public health positions in the state; 90% of licensed nurses living in Alaska work in some aspect of the profession, which means that there is not a pool of nurses available for employment.

When surveyed, Alaskan nurses give the same reasons for discontent with their profession as nurses nationwide: low pay, poor working conditions and plateauing wages. Detailed information on the survey of licensed nurses is available from the Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis, Occupational Information Unit.

About the author:

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AKCIS Provides Career Information on Shortage and Other Occupations

Current information on the nursing profession, health care professions, and other careers can be found in the Alaska Career Information System (AKCIS), available through the Alaska Employment Service, schools and vocational counselors. AKCIS provides occupational and educational information on careers, including the outlook for the profession, wages, educational and licensing requirements, school and financial information, as well as a bibliography of publications on various careers. Information on AKCIS is available through:

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