

Oklahoma's health care challenges and full practice authority

Studying Oklahoma's health statistics can paint a sobering picture. By any measure, the Sooner state ranks near the bottom compared to other states when it comes to numerous health indicators.

Notably, Oklahoma ranks higher than the national average in prevalence of heart disease, diabetes, respiratory disease and cancer, among other trends.

What causes the state to suffer? There are several factors to consider – some easier to remedy than others.

One of the leading causes is access to care, especially in rural areas. Sixty-four (64) of the state's 77 counties are considered primary care Health Professional Shortage Areas. This is according to the most recent Oklahoma Health Workforce Databook, published by the Oklahoma State Department of Health. The numbers don't stop there. Greater than 58 percent of all Oklahomans live in Health Professional Shortage Areas.

There is a common-sense approach to help address this issue: Full practice authority.

What is full practice authority?

- Full practice authority would free advanced practice registered nurses from burdensome and often merely symbolic agreements with physicians over their prescriptive authority.
- It would allow APRNs to fully utilize and implement their training and experience.
- Full practice authority does not mean a lack of supervision. APRNs would still be accountable to professional standards as administered through the state Board of Nursing.
- Nearly half of states offer full practice authority. Oklahoma is one of the 29 states that do not. In fact, Oklahoma is among the 12 most restrictive states in the country when it comes to full practice authority.

How would full practice authority improve health outcomes in Oklahoma?

- APRNs would be able to open their own practices, especially in rural and underserved areas suffering from physician shortages, once free of the burden of physician agreements.
- This would lead to more primary care providers, and in turn, increase access to affordable primary health care for ALL Oklahomans.
- Patients would have more immediate access to primary care within their own communities, reducing wait times and improving health outcomes.
- APRNs opening new practices would spur economic development in the state's rural communities, create jobs and create more desirable municipal infrastructures.