

*All facts displayed are from a 2006 report from the Alaska Physician Supply Task Force

Alaska's Shortage of Doctors

- Alaska faces a severe shortage of doctors. A 2006 report from the Alaska Physician Supply Task Force estimates that Alaska has 375 fewer doctors than needed.
- Alaska ranks 17th lowest in the nation in terms of its physician-to-population ratio with 2.05 doctors per thousand residents compared to the national average of 2.38 per thousand.
- This shortage is affecting access to care throughout the state and increasing costs. Patients with Medicare are having particular difficulty finding primary care physicians. Many face dangerously long wait times to see a doctor.
- The shortage is likely to worsen over the next 20 years as Alaska's population increases and ages. Experts predict that by 2025, nearly twice as many physicians in practice will be needed – about 1,100 more than the current 1,347 in patient care – to meet expected demand as the state's elderly population triples. To complicate matters, one-third of the physicians in Alaska are expected to retire in the next 10-15 years.
- To correct this deficit and reach an adequate supply of doctors by 2025, Alaska needs to add more than 60 physicians per year. Unfortunately, as the national supply of physicians shrinks, recruitment will become even more competitive.
- Alaska also lags far behind other states in the production of doctors. We are one of six states without an independent in-state medical school.
- We do, however, fund 20 seats at the regional WWAMI medical school. One of the primary recommendations of the Physician Supply Task Force is to incrementally increase the number of Alaska-funded WWAMI seats to 30.
- SB 18 calls for the increasing the number to 24 as that is all UAA can handle in its current facility and with existing faculty.
- 50% of Alaskan students who enter WWAMI end up practicing in Alaska. The percentage increases to 88% when WWAMI graduates from other states are included.
- Building in-state capacity for medical education will help make Alaska more self-sufficient and less susceptible to outside factors that can undermine the health of Alaskans.
- Expanding the WWAMI class is one of many strategies being proposed to address this problem. Others include instating a loan repayment program (such as that proposed in SB 139), increasing support for residency programs in Alaska, and expanding training programs for mid-level practitioners, such as physician's assistants.
- A combination of strategies is likely to achieve the greatest success for Alaska as we compete nationally for doctors and other health care providers.