

LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH SERVICES

29th Alaska Legislature
LRS Report 16.061
October 16, 2015



(907) 465-3991 phone
(907) 465-3908 fax
research@akleg.gov

State Medical Licensing Timeframes

Tim Spengler, Legislative Analyst

You asked for information about Alaska medical licensing timeframes. Specifically, you wished to know the average wait time for Alaska medical license applicants and how this compares to other states. Additionally, you wished to know if an online application would expedite the process.

Briefly, over the last year the average processing time for a medical license in Alaska has been between 16 and 18 weeks, according to the director of the Alaska Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing, within the Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development. Prior to last year, the typical average timeframe in Alaska was 12 to 14 weeks; the increase was the result of an unexpected influx of applications last year. According to our review, the application process in most states takes around 12 weeks but can fluctuate significantly. Factors that can lengthen the process for physicians attempting to become licensed in any state include applying during the busy season for medical boards (typically from March through September); a professional history that is lengthy or difficult to verify; and an applicant with a history of malpractice claims, professional disciplinary action, convictions, etc.

Some states offer both paper and online applications for medical applications while others offer only one or the other. Alaska offers an online process for those *renewing* licenses, but not for new applications. Efforts are in the works to increase the online options in the state. In general, the process of obtaining a medical license is a rigorous and challenging process in any state. According to our review, however, while each state has its own licensing requirements, none of them appear to be markedly more cumbersome or onerous than the others.¹ The application to practice medicine in Alaska includes standard threshold qualifications for licensure including graduation from an accredited medical school; successful completion of postgraduate training in accredited programs in recognized hospitals; two years of postgraduate training; and no suspensions or revocations of a medical license in another jurisdiction. The 28-page application can be viewed at <https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/portals/5/pub/med4105.pdf>.²

Below we list the questions (bulleted) that we put to the Alaska Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing, along with the responses we received (indented) from division director, Janey Hovenden.³ In a few instances we include additional information that may be of interest to you.

- The Alaska medical license application packet indicates that the average processing time for a medical license is eight to twelve weeks. Is this estimate still accurate?⁴

¹ We did find one site (comphealth.com) that lists the following ten states as the most difficult in which to be licensed as a physician: Arkansas, California, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Texas. The entity did not explain its methodology in listing these states (www.comphealth.com/resources/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/LOC336_GuideMedLic_rw_v3.pdf). Another medically-oriented website, WolfPacc, lists California and Texas as the toughest states in which to get licensed as a physician (<http://wolfpacc.com/news/california-texas-toughest-states-medical-licensing>); this distinction is based upon a number of factors including strict rules on time lapses between completing certain trainings and filing for licensure. Nowhere in our review was Alaska's medical licensing requirements noted as being especially difficult (or easy).

² More licensing information can be accessed at the Alaska State Medical Board website at <https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/cbpl/ProfessionalLicensing/StateMedicalBoard.aspx>.

³ Ms. Hovenden can be reached at (907) 465-2538.

⁴ It appears that obtaining a medical license in Alaska is more time-consuming than obtaining many other professional licenses in the state. Given the demands and consequential nature of the profession, this is perhaps not unexpected. Since each profession has unique licensing requirements, comparisons are not likely to be helpful.

The average processing time from start to finish is approximately 12-14 weeks. In the past year, that timeframe has increased to 16-18 weeks due to an unexpected influx of applications, particularly from telemedicine companies. The timeframe for license review and processing is mostly dependent on the amount of time it takes other agencies—such as hospitals and other licensing jurisdictions—to provide required documents to our office. Typically, the actual hands-on time for our staff to process payment, review files, correspond with the applicant, and issue a temporary physician license is less than two weeks.

- When applications take longer than twelve weeks what is the typical reason? Incomplete applications? Contacting other organizations? Staff shortage?⁵

Complete applications never take this long. A delay of this magnitude is always due to missing elements of an application. However, staff shortages and increased volume have exacerbated the delay. The division does not have adequate staffing levels to provide updates to the current volume of applicants more than once a month. While this update is a courtesy, the number of requirements for medical licensure that must be submitted from outside sources—such as hospitals and other licensing jurisdictions—necessitates alerting applicants to missing documents so they may follow up with these other agencies.

- It is my understanding that Alaska has a paper application system only. Has the state considered moving to an online process (or an online option) and would you anticipate such a change would speed up processing time?

The division has offered online renewal to certain programs (including medical) for years and is expanding online renewal to all programs this fall. The division is exploring options to allow certain license types to submit part of their application online.

- Has Alaska considered implementing the Federation of State Medical Boards' (FSMB) Uniform Application (UA)? Is the UA something that you believe would improve the medical licensing process and, if so, what are the roadblocks to implementing this application?

The board is in the process of implementing the FSMB uniform application process; we expect it to be in place by the end of the year.

The Uniform Application for Physician State Licensure (UA) is an integral part of the FSMB's License Portability Project. It was developed by a workgroup of medical board representatives to standardize, simplify, and streamline the licensure application process. A physician using the UA can send the same core licensure application to more than one state medical board instead of entering the same data in multiple applications. Licensure and examination information already residing in the FSMB system will pre-fill those pages of the UA. Core application information includes a chronology of activities from medical school graduation to the present and all malpractice claims.⁶

⁵ The State Medical Board Frequently asked questions page also includes the following, "Application processing time depends to a large extent on the response time from other organizations. Time required also depends upon our workload and the volume of applications being processed. Because the length of processing time for your application may vary considerably, we urge you to be patient until our processing is complete and the permit is issued. If there are any "Yes" responses or if adverse information is received, it will typically take longer to gather and evaluate additional data. If the application is referred to the Investigations Unit for investigation of a particular issue, processing time is extended by the time required to complete an investigation. Since investigations must be prioritized, it may take longer to complete the file." (<https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/cbpl/ProfessionalLicensing/StateMedicalBoard/FrequentlyAskedQuestions.aspx>)

⁶ Information from the FSMB's overview of the UA <http://www.fsmb.org/licensure/uniform-application/overview>.

- I understand Alaska accepts the FSMB's Federation Credentials Verification System (FCVS). Do many Alaska applicants utilize the FCVS and does this expedite the licensing process? If so, does it speed up the process significantly or slightly?

We do not have statistics regarding the number of applicants who utilize the FCVS. Staff offered an anecdotal estimate of approximately 30 percent. If the applicant already has an FCVS profile in place then it may speed up the process significantly. If they are establishing their initial FCVS profile then it may speed the process only slightly.

The FCVS was established in September 1996, to provide a centralized, uniform process for state medical boards to obtain a verified, primary-source record of a physician's core medical credentials.⁷ This service is designed to lighten the workload of credentialing staff and reduce duplication of efforts by gathering, verifying and permanently storing the physician's and/or physician assistant's credentials in a central repository. The FCVS obtains primary-source verification of medical education, postgraduate training, examination history, board action history, board certification and identity. This repository of information allows a physician and/or physician assistant to establish a confidential, lifetime professional portfolio with FCVS which can be forwarded, at the applicant's request, to any state medical and osteopathic board that has established an agreement with FCVS, or a hospital, health care or other entity.

- What can the legislature do (statutorily or otherwise) to help the division streamline the medical licensing process?

The board is considering participation in the Interstate Licensing Compact, which would significantly speed the licensing process for applicants that are licensed in other compact states and have completely clean records. Participation in the compact would require statutory authority. The division is undergoing a review of general processes and encouraging boards to review their statutes and regulations for outdated, outmoded, and redundant requirements. It may be useful for this type of review to be integrated into the sunset audit process.⁸

The Interstate Medical Licensure Compact establishes a voluntary pathway that will significantly streamline the licensing process for physicians seeking to practice medicine in Compact states, while maintaining the state regulatory oversight and protections necessary for patient safety. The final model Interstate Medical Licensure Compact legislation was released in September 2014. Since then, 19 state legislatures have introduced the Compact legislation and around ten have enacted it, while nearly 30 state medical and osteopathic boards have publicly expressed support for the Compact. The Compact has been endorsed by a broad coalition of health care stakeholders, including the American Medical Association (AMA). More information about the Interstate Medical Licensure Compact is available at <http://licenseportability.org/>.

We hope this is helpful. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know.

⁷ We gathered this information on the FCVS from the Federation of State Medical Boards at <http://www.fsmb.org/licensure/fcvs/overview>.

⁸ Ms. Hovenden also relates that the division is fully receipt-supported and receives no general funds. It continues to need the expenditure authority to hire the human resources and implement the technology required to keep up with the service levels expected by customers. These expenses would be fully recovered through license fees.