

April 5, 2023

House Labor & Commerce Committee
State Capitol Room 124
Juneau, AK 99801
House.Labor.And.Commerce@akleg.gov

Re: AHHA Supports HB 149

Chair Sumner and Committee Members,

For 70 years, the Alaska Hospital & Healthcare Association (AHHA) has served as a non-profit trade association representing Alaska's hospitals, nursing homes, and other healthcare partners across the continuum of care. AHHA members play an invaluable role, both as community providers and essential employers, in cities, towns, and villages across Alaska.

We respectfully urge you to pass HB 149 so that Alaska can align with a vast majority of the country and modernize its licensing process through the nurse licensure compact (NLC). Unlike everywhere else, it takes three to four months to be licensed as a nurse in Alaska, which is a substantial barrier for recruiting and retaining nurses, and delivering healthcare services across our state.

The NLC is license reciprocity for nurses, and represents a critical step for improving nursing shortages, delays in the nurse licensure process, and access to care in Alaska. The NLC is used by 39 states and jurisdictions across the country, allowing qualified nurses to practice across state lines with a single license. This reciprocity has been safely in use for almost 20 years.

Given its wide use, the NLC is mainstream and efficient. Again, joining the NLC means aligning with a vast majority of the country in following uniform practice standards that will modernize Alaska's licensing of nurses, taking the process from months to a matter of days.

One of the primary reasons the NLC was founded 20 years ago was to address the growing demand for nursing services in rural and underserved areas. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in desperate need of nurses across all of Alaska today. Alaska is projected to have the highest nurse vacancies in the United States by 2030 with over 5,000 openings and a 22% shortfall. Not only is this projection bleak, but we are already overwhelmed trying to keep up with basic demand.

With the growing need for healthcare services in our population, employee churn, and exits or retirements from the workforce, the healthcare industry in Alaska must fill 6,300 job openings in healthcare each year, including over 1,500 nurse openings. By making it more efficient for



nurses to obtain licensure in Alaska, the NLC will immediately increase the pool of qualified candidates that can fill critical vacancies quicker.

Nurses are aging and Alaska has too few graduates to replace them. The average age of a nurse and nurse practitioner in the U.S. is 57 and Alaska is not graduating nearly enough nursing students to fill our growing need now or in the future. In 2022, Alaska produced just 324 statewide nursing graduates—only 22% of the 1,500 nurses needed in our state.

It is important to remember that within the NLC reciprocity framework, the way nurses practice in Alaska will not change one iota. This is because the Alaska Board of Nursing will continue to maintain full control of the scope of practice and enforcement, meaning the only thing that will change is the process for obtaining a license, which will become faster, more efficient, and safer. Perhaps this is why Alaska nurses overwhelmingly support the NLC as evidenced by 92% of respondents favoring the NLC in a formal survey conducted in 2019 by the Alaska Board of Nursing.

The NLC also benefits our military families. Alaska is home to thousands of military members on assignment, many with spouses and family who are nurses. Joining the NLC will help these individuals seamlessly transition into our healthcare workforce.

Supporting reciprocity and joining compacts with other states is nothing new for Alaska and most certainly not an affront to our sovereignty. Alaska has been a member of at least 32 multistate compacts across several industries, and the NLC in particular offers an opportunity to enhance recruitment and retention of nurses. While “growing our own” is a crucial workforce strategy, it will take years to yield meaningful results with the shortages we are experiencing. Therefore, we should do everything in our power to welcome outside nurses to our state, especially because statistics show that we will retain a significant number of them. Specifically, the healthcare sector leads Alaska in converting nonresident workers to permanent resident workers: in 2020, 1 in 4 healthcare workers who came from outside Alaska stayed and became permanent residents.

In closing, addressing workforce shortages in the healthcare sector requires a multifaceted approach with some strategies being long term and others being immediate. Joining the NLC is an immediate strategy that will help improve nursing shortages in urban and rural Alaska, delays in the nurse licensure process, and access to care across our state. Please pass HB 149.

Sincerely,

Jared C. Kosin, JD, MBA
President & CEO

Advancing Healthcare for Alaska

www.alaskahha.org