



## *A Data Brief on the Alaska Health Care Workforce 2009*

### Changes in Number of Licensed Active Resident Health Care Providers in Alaska (Selected Categories), 2007 -2009, by Labor Market Area

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Are there “enough” doctors, dentists, pharmacists and the other health care providers to meet health care needs of Alaskans? Much press attention, the Governor’s Health Care Commission and legislative initiatives are focused on this question. Health care and insurance reform debates are also bring attention to current and anticipated supply of health care providers. Various solutions are proposed and some are in process that aim to reduce “shortages” of providers, and to increase access to care.

(See [http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dhcs/Healthplanning/workforce/workforce\\_home.htm](http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dhcs/Healthplanning/workforce/workforce_home.htm) )

Health Care as an industry is the fastest growing sector of Alaska’s economy. Total employment in health care has increased by 40% since 2000, reaching 29,000 in 2007.<sup>1</sup> In that period the population age 65 and over (and eligible for Medicare) increased by 33%. Medicare reimbursement cuts for physicians in January 2006 caused many physicians to refuse to serve Medicare patients. Although the rates were revised upward dramatically as of January 2009, limited access to care for Medicare patients has persisted, especially in the Anchorage and Fairbanks areas. The 2007 Physician Supply Task Force Report (University and DHSS sponsored) identified difficulties with both recruitment and retention, associated in part with aging of the workforce.

To see how supply of practitioners has changed since the [Physician Supply Task Force Report](#) and the [Alaska Health Care Date Book](#) were published, we have examined the regional distribution of twelve licensed provider types who are licensed by the State of Alaska. The lists of licensees is continuously updated, so it is possible to take a “snapshot” periodically, and to count the active (status “AA”), resident (address in Alaska) providers with permanent licenses (rather than locum tenens or temporary). Some of the providers thus

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<sup>1</sup> Alaska Economic Trends

counted may be keeping their license active despite being otherwise employed or retired. The count of such licensees thus exceeds the number actually in direct patient care. However for comparison over time (given no major changes in cost or conditions of maintaining a license) the licensee count is the most efficient way available to check on changes in “supply” of providers in the state, and in the labor market areas.

## Highlights

In the two and a half year period examined, the number of physicians has increased by 38, a mere 2%. The southeast labor market area was the only area to have a net loss of physicians (losing eight), while Anchorage-Matanuska Susitna Region and the Gulf Coast areas gained 29 and 10 respectively.<sup>2</sup> “Mid-level” providers who are predominantly primary care providers (physician assistants and nurse practitioners) increased by 76. 36 were physician assistants (a 13% increase) and 40 were nurse practitioners (a 9% increase).<sup>3</sup>

<i>Table 1. Active Alaska Licensees by Provider Type</i>	<i>Feb/March 2007</i>	<i>August 2009</i>	<i>Increase/Decrease</i>	<i>Percent Change</i>
Physicians	1,545	1,583	38	2%
Psychologists	138	132	-6	-4%
Physician Assistants	284	320	36	13%
Nurse Practitioners	450	490	40	9%
Registered Nurses	5,796	6,334	538	9%
Certified Nurse Assistants (CAN)	2,520	2,880	360	14%
Dentists	467	486	19	4%
Dental Hygienists	426	444	18	4%
Professional Counselors	356	417	61	17%
Pharmacists	421	471	50	12%
Pharmacy Technicians	958	1,246	288	30%
Physical & Occupational Therapists	598	607	9	2%

Dentists and dental hygienists have increased by 4%. Psychologists are one group that has declined by 4%, with a decrease of 6 from the 138 with active licenses in spring 2007.

The pharmacist count increased from 420 to 471, a 12% increase, and pharmacy technicians increased by 30% to 1,246. Indeed the 30% increase was the largest percentage increase among the twelve groups documented in the tables below.

<sup>2</sup> Alaska State Medical Association (ASMA) reports 1357 physicians practicing as of December 2008, a decline from the 1381 listed two years earlier. Their hypothetical explanation is that retirements are affecting the supply. A number of physicians who report being retired to ASMA have kept their licenses active. Neither ASMA nor licensing databases have all of the federal employee and military physicians who may practice in the state for a period of time.

<sup>3</sup> Data source for licensees is <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/occ/search3.htm>, website of Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing

Population changes in different parts of the state would be expected to affect need and demand for care, and for the services of health care workers. Given the perceived and reported shortages, and increase in elderly population, it is hoped that growth in the health care workforce would help to make up the deficit. Overall, Alaska's population has grown just a percentage in the most recent reported two-year period, while the elderly population grew by nearly ten percent. Regionally, growth was higher in the Anchorage-Matanuska Susitna labor market area, the Gulf Coast and the Interior. Southeast and southwest regions lost a percentage of their population although the number of seniors increased, while the Northern region lost slightly both overall and among the elderly.

<i>Table 2.</i>	<i>Alaska Population</i>			
<b>Labor Market Area</b>	2006	2008	Change #	Change %
Anchorage-MatSu	359,987	367,509	7,522	2%
Gulf Coast	74,611	75,876	1,265	2%
Interior	102,276	104,421	2,145	2%
North	23676	23612	-64	0%
Southeast	70,053	69,202	-851	-1%
Southwest	39450	39,100	-350	-1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>670,053</b>	<b>679,720</b>	<b>9,667</b>	<b>1%</b>

<i>Table 3.</i>	<i>Alaska Population 65+</i>			
<b>Labor Market Area</b>	2006	2008	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	22,886	25,236	2,350	10%
Gulf Coast	6,335	7,082	747	12%
Interior	6,123	6,831	708	12%
North	1411	1370	-41	-3%
Southeast	6,540	6,805	265	4%
Southwest	2,117	2,128	11	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>45,412</b>	<b>49,452</b>	<b>4,040</b>	<b>9%</b>

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, Tables 06CAGE6x.xls & 08CAGE6x.xls  
<http://almis.labor.state.ak.us/?PAGEID=67&SUBID=115>

As shown in the tables following, the Anchorage-Matanuska Susitna Labor Market Area was the only region to gain in every professional group – other regions had a net loss in one or more category of health care professional.

Federal dollars for loan repayment programs support recruitment and retention of providers. In 2009, "American Recovery Act" is adding funding for three such programs: the National Health Service Corps, Indian Health Service loan repayment program and Alaska State Loan Repayment Program (initiated fall 2009) (<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dhcs/healthplanning/primarycare/loans/>). The State of Alaska provides university training programs for nursing professions, medical technicians and many other occupational groups. The State now supports twenty slots for Alaska medical students in each class of medical students at WWAMI (the multi-state regional medical school), and it supports the Family Medicine Residency. State appropriations have increased for such programs in the last decade, but level of funding is reconsidered every year.<sup>4</sup> Nationally and in Alaska, concern has continued to rise about workforce shortages, especially in light of potential impact of health insurance reform to cover more Americans.

<sup>4</sup> See Alaska SLRP Press Release and other documents

*Active Licensed Health Care Providers (Selected Categories) by Labor Market Area (Region),  
Increases/Decreases since 2007*

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	1,014	1,043	29	3%
Gulf Coast	117	127	10	9%
Interior	178	180	2	1%
North	21	24	3	14%
Southeast	176	168	-8	-5%
Southwest	39	41	2	5%
Total	1,545	1,583	38	2%

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	88	92	4	5%
Gulf Coast	11	10	-1	-9%
Interior	18	16	-2	-11%
North	3	1	-2	-67%
Southeast	15	12	-3	-20%
Southwest	3	1	-2	-67%
Total	138	132	-6	-4%

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	136	179	43	32%
Gulf Coast	28	29	1	4%
Interior	52	55	3	6%
North	17	14	-3	-18%
Southeast	28	22	-6	-21%
Southwest	23	21	-2	-9%
Total	284	320	36	13%

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	195	230	35	18%
Gulf Coast	29	30	1	3%
Interior	51	64	13	25%
North	10	10	0	0%
Southeast	55	65	10	18%
Southwest	16	18	2	13%
Total	356	417	61	17%

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	305	315	10	3%
Gulf Coast	41	48	7	17%
Interior	34	52	18	53%
North	7	9	2	29%
Southeast	42	47	5	12%
Southwest	21	19	-2	-10%
Total	450	490	40	9%

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	244	294	50	20%
Gulf Coast	47	51	4	9%
Interior	60	59	-1	-2%
North	3	3	0	0%
Southeast	49	55	6	12%
Southwest	18	9	-9	-50%
Total	421	471	50	12%

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	3,702	4,089	387	10%
Gulf Coast	547	629	82	15%
Interior	669	731	62	9%
North	105	90	-15	-14%
Southeast	646	660	14	2%
Southwest	127	135	8	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,796</b>	<b>6,334</b>	<b>538</b>	<b>9%</b>

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	594	778	184	31%
Gulf Coast	100	125	25	25%
Interior	126	160	34	27%
North	26	35	9	35%
Southeast	109	130	21	19%
Southwest	3	18	15	500%
<b>Total</b>	<b>958</b>	<b>1246</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>30%</b>

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	1,156	1,264	108	9%
Gulf Coast	462	566	104	23%
Interior	365	459	94	26%
North	56	44	-12	-21%
Southeast	448	508	60	13%
Southwest	33	39	6	18%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,520</b>	<b>2,880</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>14%</b>

Labor Market Area	Mar-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	376	392	16	4%
Gulf Coast	72	73	1	1%
Interior	72	69	-3	-4%
North	3	2	-1	-33%
Southeast	65	63	-2	-3%
Southwest	10	8	-2	-20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>598</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2%</b>

Labor Market Area	Feb-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	278	279	1	0%
Gulf Coast	46	53	7	15%
Interior	63	70	7	11%
North	9	10	1	11%
Southeast	49	55	6	12%
Southwest	22	19	-3	-14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>467</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>4%</b>

Labor Market Area	Feb-07	Aug-09	Change #	Change %
Anchorage -MatSu	268	287	19	7%
Gulf Coast	43	50	7	16%
Interior	44	50	6	14%
North	2	5	3	150%
Southeast	47	48	1	2%
Southwest	22	4	-18	-82%
<b>Total</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>444</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>4%</b>

Licensed professionals and paraprofessionals not included in the tables above are: specialist dentists, chiropractors, naturopaths, acupuncturists, speech and language pathologists, optometrists, dispensing opticians, audiologists, LPNs, paramedics, and several categories of behavioral health counselors: BA counselors, psych associates, MSW, LCSW, and licensed therapists.