

Health commission suggests greater authority for NPs as provider gap grows

By Angela Hart
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Health experts and doctors behind a new workforce report called Monday for allowing nurse practitioners to operate independently of physicians, a controversial issue that for years has split powerful interest groups in Sacramento.

To address a severe shortfall of health care providers in California, the Legislature and Gov. Gavin Newsom should pass a law expanding scope of practice for nurse practitioners "as soon as possible," said Heather Young, a professor and founding dean of the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at the University of California, Davis.

Young is one of 24 members of the California Future Health Workforce Commission, which issued a set of 10 immediate recommendations Monday to address severe provider shortfalls in behavioral and primary care that have grown worse due to population growth and expanded health coverage under the Affordable Care Act. The state faces a gap of 4,100 primary care doctors alone over the next decade.

The scope-of-practice proposal would give nurse practitioners greater autonomy to prescribe drugs, approve treatment plans and examine patients on their own. That would represent a reversal from current law, under which doctors retain broad authority over the practice of medicine in California.

Young said commissioners "really want to transcend" divisive arguments that have shaped the debate in the Legislature. Without action, the state faces a looming health care crisis that will drive health care costs even higher and cut off patient access to primary care, the report found. Granting full practice authority to nurse practitioners would reduce reliance on costly emergency room trips and hospitalizations by increasing access to preventative care, saving Californians a projected \$7.2 billion by 2028, according to the report.

The change would likely face extreme pushback from doctors, led by the California Medical Association, which for years has opposed several attempts at similar changes, arguing that nurses aren't equipped

to deliver the same quality care as doctors. The CMA was behind an organized effort to kill bills in back-to-back legislative sessions that sought to give nurses more independence in licensing.

CA SB323 (15R), by former state Sen. Ed Hernandez in 2016, would have allowed nurse practitioners to practice without the supervision of physicians or surgeons. A previous bill, also by Hernandez in 2013, would have done the same. CMA opposed both.

The powerful group also opposed a bill last session by Assemblywoman Autumn Burke (D-Marina del Rey) that sought similar scope-of-practice changes to laws governing midwives, CA AB1612 (17R). That would have expanded their authority over delivery and maternity care. The bill died early in the year.

CMA did not immediately have a response Monday.

The health care workforce commission is expected to advocate on behalf of the controversial change as part of its overall recommendations targeting action by the Legislature and Newsom administration, colleges, medical institutions and private philanthropic organizations, said University of California President Janet Napolitano, a commission co-chair.

"We can't just put this issue off," Napolitano said of the provider shortage.

Researchers behind the workforce report concluded that "there is no difference in the quality of care when there are no physician oversight requirements," and found scope-of-practice restrictions have exacerbated primary care shortages, especially in rural regions and low-income neighborhoods.

California is one of 28 states that restrict scope of practice for nurse practitioners and is the only one in the West, according to the nonprofit California Health Care Foundation, which contributed to the commission's work.