

OpED: Rural Texas Needs Health Care Providers, Why is a Texas Law Still Standing in the Way?

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Living in rural Texas shouldn't mean going without access to health care.

It's well documented that rural Texans face obstacles when it comes to providing and accessing health care services, including workforce shortages, aging infrastructure, and difficulties in getting health care coverage. This has huge negative implications on both the physical and mental health of people of all ages.

A lack of accessible health care leads to a lower quality of life and decreased life expectancy, and many times from illnesses that are preventable. A significant shortage of mental health care is directly related to a higher suicide rate among young people in rural areas.

The good news is, there is a willing workforce of skilled nurse practitioners who are ready to step in and do more, if Texas lawmakers will let them.

As a Nurse Practitioner (NP) advocating for rural health, I know the single most immediate and impactful step lawmakers can take is to remove the state mandate that nurse practitioners secure a contract, what's called a delegation agreement, with a physician before they can provide care to patients.

The reality is clear: rural Texans want and deserve more health care access.

Nurse practitioners are one of three professions providing primary care in the United States, along with physicians and physician assistants (PA). NPs have provided safe, high-quality care for more than half a century, yet Texas state regulations still prevent them from practicing without first obtaining a contract with a physician.

Unfortunately, for a lot of rural Texans that leaves them with two options: long trips to find care, or no care at all. Far too many rural Texans go without care.

What is this contract agreement and why does it exist? It is a relic from when NPs first became a licensed profession. Texas, along with other states, required NPs and their contracted physician to work in the same office. After decades of positive health outcomes, most states, the Veterans Affairs (VA) and all branches of the US military have eliminated these contract requirements altogether.

[Ten years ago](#), Texas removed the requirement that NPs and their contracted physician had to work in the same office. However, it still requires that NPs have a physician contract, which requires one phone call a month with a physician to discuss patients seen months ago. This physician might live in another part of the state. No other professions in Texas are required to have this kind of contract to do their job.

Finding a physician to contract with can be particularly complicated for NPs wanting to practice in the most underserved areas, like rural Texas. Even worse, if the contracting physician retires or passes away, an NP is prohibited from seeing a single patient until they find a new physician to contract with. This means if you have an appointment tomorrow, you may not have access to care.

This outdated and unnecessary mandate is causing greater barriers to getting care in an already complicated and burdened rural environment. To put it simply, NPs educated and trained in Texas can find it easier way [to provide care to patients in other states with fewer obstacles](#). [Many leave the state](#) altogether after graduating.

[NPs are more likely to work in rural areas](#), where the population is also aging at a faster rate than elsewhere. Rural patients trust NPs with their health. A 2022 poll conducted for AARP of Texas voters aged 50 and older found that [83% support NPs as primary care providers](#).

If Texas is serious about solving our health care crisis, we must address the barrier standing between patients and NPs.

That means freeing NPs to care for more patients. The future of primary care is clear, in fact the number of new NPs outpaces physicians, and [two-thirds of the practitioners added to the workforce between now and 2030 will be advanced practice clinicians like NPs](#). But will they be in Texas? The truth is, Texas is lagging behind and Texans are suffering the consequences. Rural Texans feel the increased suffering of these consequences.

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