

# Alaska's COVID-19 Response & the NLC

## Alaska Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development

### Alaska's Urgent Need:

The Alaska State Hospital and Nursing Home Association (ASHNHA) and its members have requested assistance from the State of Alaska to help with the current COVID-19 surge in the state.

In response to this need, the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) submitted a staffing request to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for 298 registered nurses, 105 certified nurse aides, and 53 other types of medical personnel.

### Why Alaska's Current Systems Can't Manage the Surge:

The health care boards under the Division of Corporations, Business, and Professional Licensing (CBPL) have created Emergency Courtesy Licenses (ECLs) which expedite licensure as much as possible, and to the same degree it was expedited under SB 241 (2020) and HB 76. However, the boards do not have the capacity to process hundreds of ECL applications quickly enough to meet the current need—or projected future needs. Current demand and fulfillment of the FEMA request added to state agency staffing vacancies means an emergency nursing license could take several weeks to obtain. If more staff positions are required to meet the need, nurse license fees are likely to increase to cover the cost and a delay would still be experienced due to the time it will take to train staff.

### Why is Waiving Licensing Laws a Bad Idea?

Simply waiving the requirement for nurses to be licensed to physically practice in Alaska is not a good solution. There would be no incoming check that a nurse's qualifications or background meets Alaska's standards, and Alaskans will have no recourse to lodge a complaint against a nurse. Licensing boards will have no jurisdiction to act if something goes wrong.

### Why is the NLC the Solution?

Joining the Multistate Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC) will allow registered nurses holding a multistate license from any of the 38 participating jurisdictions to bypass the costly and time-consuming licensure process without bypassing vetting or lowering the standards of care in the state. Becoming a participant in the NLC will help fill hundreds of critical nursing positions across the state that are currently vacant and increase access to quality healthcare for Alaskans; and is the best solution for Alaska in both the short- and long-term.

Multistate nurses are required to meet a higher standard to obtain a license than Alaska-only nurses. Joining the NLC will strengthen Alaska's healthcare delivery system without a loss of state sovereignty. Passage of HB 83 or SB 67 will place the NLC language and requirements into state law and cannot be changed without further action by the Alaska State Legislature.

### What Has Happened in Other States that Implemented the NLC During COVID?

**New Jersey:** Prior to COVID-19, New Jersey had enacted the NLC with plans for implementation later in 2020. Then on March 13th, as state governors were passing emergency declarations allowing nurses from outside their states to practice, New Jersey proceeded with an unprecedented partial implementation of the NLC, meaning nurses from out of state with the multistate license could immediately practice in New Jersey.

As vice president at the Center for Professional Development, Innovation & Research at RWJBarnabas Health (RWJBH), Mary Beth Russell, PhD, MA, RN, NPD-BC, NEA-BC, is directly involved in promoting safety and quality care for patients. RWJBH is New Jersey's largest integrated health care delivery system, serving more than three million patients each year:

"[The NLC] was vital because when resources in one area become diminished or depleted, we can take resources from another and deploy them," said Russell. "This is key, particularly in the area of disaster preparedness. In the health care arena, the

ability to respond quickly is correlated to reducing long-term health issues and saving lives. Expediting the process has absolutely enabled us to move people appropriately where they're needed."

Although recognizing multistate licenses during the pandemic was very beneficial, Russell says that there is also a need to remove barriers so that nurses from all states can cross borders and practice where they are needed, not just in emergencies. "For us, the compact has provided some flexibility without losing any of the benefits and the requirements that must be met, both during the current pandemic and in general," she says. "It allows qualified nurses to be onboarded in clinical areas where they're experientially and educationally prepared to work. Having additional resources readily available ensures the safety of our patients and our employees."

**Missouri:** An NLC member state since 2009, Missouri is one of seven states that did not anticipate a need to pass an emergency declaration allowing nurses from non-NLC states to come in and practice during the pandemic. As an NLC state, Missouri has access to nurses from 38 participating jurisdiction, meaning they don't have to go through an application or vetting process if nurses are needed in an emergency – there is no delay.

Because Missouri is part of the NLC, travel nurses from outside the state were able to remain there on staff during the pandemic. "Having the extra staff on hand helped decrease nurse patient ratios during this time," said Jenni Kent, MBA, MSN, RN, CNML, a nurse manager at Liberty Hospital in Liberty in Missouri.

The NLC also gave Missouri nurses the ability to leave the state to help elsewhere. "If Missouri was not an NLC state, the nurses traveling to help in areas of need would be likely delayed, waiting on state nursing license approval," said Kent. "The ability to fluidly transfer nursing abilities nationally provides an exceptional resource during any type of disaster. It allows for health care providers to choose to be deployed during times of extensive crises."

**What we are learning:** "I think the COVID-19 outbreak is going to cause the states that are not in the compact now to really take a second look at it," says NCSBN NLC Director Jim Puente, MS, MJ, CAE. "If the NLC was expanded to all 50 states, none of the guesswork with emergency orders would be necessary because nurses could travel to other states where they are needed. No applications, fees, or background checks would be necessary. Disaster preparedness is a nonpartisan issue. The NLC is a solution to modernizing licensure and responding to disaster."

[Excerpts from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, of which Alaska is a member.]