Our Unhealthy State
How Advanced Practice Registered Nurses can be a part of the solution for Texas

The Problem
Texas faces an unprecedented primary health care provider crisis. Approximately 13 percent of Texans do not have access to a primary care provider. In rural Texas, the problem has reached critical proportions. Ninety percent of Texas counties are designated at least partially as medically underserved, and in 25 of those counties, there is no physician at all.

Despite the ongoing economic recession, Texas is still growing. The population of the state increases by approximately 1 million residents every two years. As a consequence, the primary health care provider crisis will only worsen. The state must move quickly and pursue public policy changes to improve safe, cost effective access to basic preventive and primary health care services.

The Solution
The state should pursue a new, balanced 21st Century approach to confront the primary care provider crisis. Specifically, the state should embrace policies to recruit more primary care physicians and rely more heavily on Advanced Practice Registered Nurses to provide essential health care services.

The District of Columbia and 35 states do not have the old-fashioned restrictions on APRNs that keep them from providing primary care to people in greatest need. By updating the older laws, Texas can significantly reduce the number of residents who have little or no access to basic health care services.

Why Rely on APRNs?
It is estimated that a greater reliance on APRNs to provide preventive and primary health care services can reduce overall costs by 20 percent. Additionally, APRNs are more likely than traditional primary care providers to practice in rural areas and with vulnerable at-risk populations that are more underserved.

APRNs have the education and necessary training to provide a range of services that approach 90 percent of those delivered by traditional primary care physicians. APRNs are already providing essential primary and specialty care services in clinics, hospitals, and long-term care facilities. The state should simply remove certain restrictions and allow APRNs to provide primary health care to a wider range of Texas residents.

There are over 12,000 APRNs that have extensive education and training to meet the primary and specialty health care needs of Texas. These include:

- 350 Certified Nurse-Midwives;
- 3,000 Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists;
- 1,450 Clinical Nurse Specialists; and
- 7,900 Nurse Practitioners.

Each type of APRN plays an essential role in providing health care for Texas. Unfortunately, APRNs, and physicians, are forced to operate under an antiquated and burdensome regulatory structure that prevents APRNs from fulfilling their potential to care for more Texans and provide all services they are qualified to perform as a result of extensive education and training. Texas should pursue a common-sense approach and remove these barriers and start treating Texans.

No Help From Washington
The federal government has once again tried and failed to address the health care crisis in the country. This has ominous implications for Texas. As the state continues to grow, the primary care physician shortage will only worsen while people needing urgent medical care will still go to emergency rooms, and some of those farther away from their homes.

At a time when the state faces a crippling budget deficit and will struggle to meet the most basic of services, it only makes common sense for the state to maximize the use of all its health care professionals in the safest, most cost-effective manner possible.

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