

### *The National Health Service Corps: Building Healthy Communities by Supporting Qualified Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants*

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) builds healthy communities by supporting qualified medical, dental, and mental and behavioral health care providers working in areas of the United States with limited access to care. As of October 2010, there are more than 2,200 nurse practitioners and physician assistants (PAs) serving in the NHSC.<sup>1</sup>

Through the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program, fully trained primary care nurse practitioners and physician assistants may receive an initial, tax-free loan repayment award of up to \$60,000 for two years of service. Continued service provides the opportunity to pay off all medical profession student loans.

In addition to the NHSC Loan Repayment Program, the NHSC Scholarship Program pays tuition and living expenses while students train to become a nurse practitioner or physician assistant. To receive an NHSC scholarship, students must be enrolled in an accredited program located in the United States. Upon graduation, NHSC Scholars serve as primary care practitioners in an NHSC-approved site of greatest need for two to four years, depending on their contract.

### *Nurse Practitioner and Physician Assistant Workforce*

There were approximately 158,348 nurse practitioners in 2008, comprising 63.2 percent of all advanced practice nurses.<sup>2</sup> That same year there were roughly 73,893 physician assistants working in clinical practice.<sup>3</sup> In 2007, patients were attended by a non-physician clinician (physician assistant or nurse practitioner/midwife) at 17.5 percent of visits. Additionally, the percentage of visits attended solely by a non-physician clinician (i.e., nurse practitioner or physician assistant) increased by 145 percent in 2007 though the number of visits attended solely by a physician remained stagnant during the same time period.<sup>4</sup>

The demand for physician assistant and nurse practitioners is expected to grow over the next decade. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates that the demand for practicing physician assistants will grow by about 39 percent between 2008 and 2018.<sup>5,6</sup>

Furthermore, non-physicians often serve as the primary medical provider in rural and inner-city areas. Nationally, 15 percent of all physician assistants practice in rural areas, and often the PA is the only medical provider in the community.<sup>7</sup> According to a 2009-2010 national survey from the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, approximately 35.3 percent of nurse practitioners work in inner-city locations while 17.8 percent practice in rural areas.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, 68 percent of nurse practitioners practice in at least one primary care site.<sup>9</sup>

### *Barriers to Entering the Nurse Practitioner and Physician Assistant Workforce*

The entry level salary is one of the biggest barriers for nurse practitioners and physician assistants, being much lower than what primary care physicians make. The median annual wage of physician assistants was \$81,230 in May, 2008.<sup>10</sup> According to the American Academy of Physician Assistants' 2009 Census Report, mean income for physician assistants in primary care was the lowest of the specialties, \$85,461 in 2009, almost \$10,000 less than the mean for physician assistants as a whole.<sup>11</sup> The 2009 mean full-time nurse practitioners base salary was \$89,450.<sup>12</sup>



Student debt is playing a substantial role in the future employment plans of nurse practitioner and physician assistant students. The mean amount of expected debt for physician assistant students nationwide is \$55,321, according to the AAPA Regional Report of the 2007 New PA Student Census Survey. Twenty-five percent of physician assistant students responding to the survey said they expected to have more than \$80,000 in debt.<sup>13</sup> Unlike registered nurse programs which require anywhere from an associate to bachelor's degree, nurse practitioners are required to have a Master's degree.<sup>14</sup>

According to a study from the American Association of College of Nursing, students with a Master's degree in nursing report an average debt load of \$44,393 from their graduate studies.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the NHSC, the Federal government has recently increased its support for training programs in these specialties to help mitigate the burden of educational debt for nurse practitioners and physician assistants. In 2011, the Department of Health and Human Services awarded just over \$16 million to fund traineeships at eligible institutions for registered nurses enrolled in advanced education nursing programs. The grants are meant to encourage nurses to get an advanced degree and become nurse practitioners and other specialists.<sup>16</sup> The Federal government has also expanded the Physician Assistant Training Program to provide \$32 million in funding for 40 primary care physician assistant training programs through 2014. The program funds physician assistant student stipends, educational expenses, reasonable living expenses, and indirect costs for a total of \$22,000 per student, for a maximum of two years per student.<sup>17</sup>

### *Where Primary Care is Needed Most*

Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) are defined regionally by population group or medical need. They can be urban or rural and are classified by a lack of primary care practitioners, dentists, and mental and behavioral health specialists. All NHSC-approved sites are located in HPSAs, and currently, there are more than 12,000 sites.

- There are 6,422 primary medical HPSAs in the United States, with an estimated underserved population of 38,617,172.<sup>18</sup>
- The total number of primary care professionals needed to remove the HPSA designation for all underserved areas is 7,420.<sup>19</sup>

### *Additional Information*

To learn more about the NHSC and the dedicated nurse practitioners and physician assistants who provide service in all 50 states and territories, visit [NHSC.hrsa.gov](http://NHSC.hrsa.gov).



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