

The Future of Nursing 2020-2030

Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity

REPORT BRIEF



Lifting Nurse Practice Barriers to Advance Health Equity

The Challenge

Everyone, no matter who they are or where they live, needs access to high-quality, affordable health care and opportunities for health so they can be healthy and well. But as of March 2020, more than 80 million people—roughly one-quarter of the country—lived in an area with a shortage of health professionals. Factors like race, level of income, and access to safe and affordable housing and transportation also directly impact health and well-being. Nurses at all levels and in all settings have the education, skills, experience, and training to fill this critical care gap and address health disparities—if they are given the autonomy and institutional support to do so.

Expanding scope of practice for advanced practice registered nurses, including nurse practitioners—which allows them to prescribe medication, diagnose patients, and provide treatment independent of a physician—would significantly increase access to care, particularly in rural and underserved communities, which tend to experience high poverty rates and a heavy burden of chronic disease.

Twenty-seven states still restrict full practice authority for nurse practitioners. According to a 2018 UnitedHealth Group report, if all states allowed nurse practitioners to practice to the full extent of their education and training, about 31 million more people living in primary care shortage areas would have access to the primary care they need to stay healthy.

About the Report

For too long, the United States has overinvested in treating illness and underinvested in promoting health and well-being and preventing disease. Even before COVID-19 illuminated disparities and exacerbated inequities in the United States, nurses were advocating for better care and access for individuals, families, and communities. At the request of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a National Academy of Medicine committee conducted a study aimed at charting a path forward for the nursing profession to help ensure that all people have what they need to live their healthiest lives. The report was published in May 2021 and builds on progress nurses have made over the past decade.¹

Why Nurses?

Promoting health and well-being has long been an essential role of nurses—they are bridge builders and collaborators who engage and connect with people, communities, and organizations to ensure people from all backgrounds have what they need to be healthy and well. But they need ongoing support from the systems that educate, train, employ, and enable them to fully deploy their expertise and training so they can help advance health equity for all.

¹ <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/12956/the-future-of-nursing-leading-change-advancing-health>

