



ALASKA

RURAL HEALTH TRANSFORMATION



Recap: RHTP Impacts Strengthen Workforce, Session 2, May 14, 2026

Overview

This meeting focused on strengthening Alaska's health care workforce pipeline and improving provider retention as part of the Rural Health Transformation Program. Tricia Franklin, Program Coordinator, welcomed participants on behalf of the Department of Health. The purpose of the session was to better understand workforce challenges across Alaska, review current workforce data, hear examples of successful strategies, and gather feedback from partners across the state.

Session Purpose and Goals

Dr. Anne Zink and Dr. Lisa Rabinowitz explained that these sessions are designed to support collaboration rather than prioritize individual projects.

They emphasized that Rural Health Transformation is not about promoting one grant application over another, but about helping organizations partner together to solve shared workforce challenges across Alaska.

Key focus areas included:

- Understanding regional workforce challenges
- Identifying gaps in provider recruitment and retention
- Exploring successful workforce development models
- Sharing ideas for long-term sustainability across Alaska communities

They also reminded attendees that workforce shortages continue to impact access to specialty care, rural services, and health care delivery statewide.

Workforce Data and Current Challenges

Dr. Rabinowitz reviewed current workforce data and highlighted several major concerns across Alaska's health care system.

Provider Shortages

Alaska remains below national averages for physicians per capita and continues to face significant shortages in:

- Primary care
- Specialty and subspecialty care
- Psychiatry
- Surgical services
- Nursing

She noted that nurse practitioners and physician assistants are often helping fill these gaps, especially in rural communities.

Aging Workforce

A major concern is that Alaska's health care workforce is aging.

- A higher percentage of physicians are over age 55 compared to national averages
- Many providers are approaching retirement
- Succession planning is becoming increasingly urgent

Nursing Gaps

Nursing shortages remain especially severe.

Key statistics included:

- About 20% vacancy rate for hospital-based registered nurses
- Average of 143 days to fill open RN positions
- Alaska will need more than 1,100 nurses annually over the next 10 years
- An estimated 67 new nursing positions created each year

Programs like the University of Alaska Anchorage nursing program and the Alaska WAMI medical education program are helping, but major gaps remain in clinical placements and supervision needed for hands-on training.

Recruitment and Retention Challenges

Participants emphasized that successfully recruiting and retaining providers is just as critical as training new ones.

While Alaska offers some of the highest health care wages in the nation, several persistent barriers continue to make recruitment challenging.

Major Barriers

- High housing costs
- Limited housing availability
- Shortages in child care
- Variability in school quality across communities
- Limited family support networks, especially in rural communities

These challenges are especially difficult for providers relocating with families.

Traveling Workforce Challenges

Traveling health care workers were also discussed as a major issue.

Because travel providers are often paid more through staffing agencies:

- Workplace tension can increase
- Permanent staff may feel undervalued
- Some Alaska-grown providers leave permanent jobs for higher-paying travel work elsewhere

Alaska Hospital and Health Care Association (AHHA) Strategy

Elizabeth King from AHHA shared their workforce strategy, which focuses on three key areas:

Pipeline

This work focuses on recruiting and training future health care workers early.

Examples include:

- K–12 health care career awareness
- Helping students understand health care jobs beyond doctors and nurses
- Building stronger relationships between schools and health care employers

Pathways

This focuses on career development and professional growth opportunities.

Examples include:

- Professional development
- Advanced training
- Certification opportunities
- Clinical skill building
- Career advancement support

This also improves retention because staff are more likely to stay when they see opportunities for growth.

Protection

This area focuses on retaining the existing workforce by improving workplace conditions.

Examples include:

- Addressing burnout
- Supporting provider wellness
- Reducing workplace violence
- Improving overall retention efforts

“Find Your Fit” Website

Elizabeth King highlighted AHHA’s “Find Your Fit” workforce website as a major workforce development tool.

The website helps students and career changers explore health care careers across Alaska by offering:

- Career quizzes
- Real health care worker stories
- Videos from professionals across the state
- Education pathway information
- Exposure to non-patient-facing health care careers

The goal is to help people understand that health care includes many career options and does not always require years of medical school.

Funding Opportunities and Limitations

Dr. Zink reviewed how Rural Health Transformation funds can and cannot be used.

Funds Can Support

- High school certificate programs
- Workforce development funds
- Certification programs
- Training programs
- Telehealth expansion
- Scope-of-practice improvements
- Structured incentives for providers

Funds Cannot Support

- Direct loan repayment programs

However, participants were encouraged to use existing programs like:

- National Health Service Corps
- State Loan Repayment Program
- Nurse Corps
- Healthcare Workforce Enhancement Program

These can work alongside Rural Health Transformation efforts.

Breakout Session Themes

Participants then moved into breakout groups to discuss real-world solutions and lessons learned.

Several strong themes emerged.

Key Workforce Solutions Discussed

Reducing Burnout

Participants discussed:

- AI tools for education and administrative tasks
- Reducing provider paperwork burdens
- Flexible scheduling models like week-on/week-off systems
- Supporting the providers who have been holding the system together for years

There was strong agreement that retention efforts must also focus on current staff, not just recruiting new providers.

Entry-Level Workforce Development

There was discussion around the need for:

- Entry-level health care jobs
- Specialized in-home pediatric nursing
- Patient navigators
- Community health aides
- Peer support services

Participants stressed that workforce conversations often focus too heavily on physicians and nurses while missing other critical roles.

Housing, Childcare, and Schools

Rural communities emphasized that recruitment often depends on:

- Available housing
- Childcare access

SchoolsSome communities are even shifting to building more single-provider housing because fewer families are relocating.

Mentorship and Clinical Supervision

Participants highlighted:

- The importance of mentorship
- Better incentives for clinical supervision
- Support for older providers transitioning into teaching roles
- Stronger pathways from high school to retirement across the full workforce lifecycle

Existing Successful Programs Mentioned

Participants shared several strong examples already happening across Alaska, including:

- Military SkillBridge workforce pathways
- Project SEARCH
- Community health aide to nursing pathways
- Residency rotations through Alaska Native Medical Center
- Peer support workforce models
- Neighborhood health worker training
- Grow-your-own workforce development programs

A major theme was that strong programs already exist, but there is often not enough connection between them.

Closing Remarks

The session closed with strong agreement that there is no single statewide solution for workforce challenges.

What works for Sitka may not work for Palmer, Kodiak, or Utqiagvik.

Success will require:

- Flexible regional solutions
- Stronger partnerships between schools, universities, employers, and licensing boards
- Better connection between existing workforce programs
- Support for both new providers and long-term staff already serving Alaska communities

Participants agreed that Alaska already has many strong efforts underway, the next step is improving coordination and building stronger bridges between them. RHTP represents a long-term opportunity to strengthen health care access, sustainability, workforce capacity, and system performance across rural, remote, and frontier Alaska.

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More information and updates can be found at: health.alaska.gov/RHTP