

Free Nurse Practitioners

Now more than ever, we need nurse practitioners to help provide mental healthcare and alleviate the strain on mental health. Our state has the [9th worst](#) suicide mortality rate in the country. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, [40% of adolescent Arkansans \(grades 9-12\) experience depression each year](#). Research by the National Alliance of Mental Health has shown that [90% of individuals who die by suicide had some previous history of mental illness](#). Both the Center for Disease Control and the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention found that [suicide is the second leading cause of death for Arkansans between the ages of 15-34](#). According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, in 2017, [four times more Arkansans died from suicide than died from alcohol related motor accidents](#).

Even though the state's high suicide rate suggests that Arkansas has a large problem, many Arkansans lack access to mental health care. The 2017 State of Mental Health in America Report finds that [approximately 77% of the youth in Arkansas with depression are untreated](#). According to *About You Magazine*, Luke Kramer, the executive director of the STARR Coalition, a nonprofit organization that works to find solutions to mental health problems said that ["Arkansas is on the bottom when it comes to mental health care access."](#)

Arkansas does not have enough primary care physicians to address the mental health needs of the entire state. In 2015, while [Arkansas had 10.7 primary care physicians per 10,000 people, this number varied widely across counties](#). For example, [Izard county had only 0.7 primary care physicians per 10,000 people, whereas Pulaski county had 25.3 primary care physicians per 10,000 people](#).

Nurse practitioners can provide additional care to address the mental health needs in underserved areas. They receive education in specialty areas; this allows some to be board-certified as Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioners. Their training and certification prepare them to provide pharmacological and therapeutic treatment for anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and

much more. However, in the absence of a contract with a doctor, a nurse practitioner is unable to prescribe medications for those with mental illness. Yet, Arkansas law prevents a nurse practitioner (NP) from practicing independently without a written collaborative practice agreement with a physician. These agreements are meant to provide NPs with physicians to collaborate with; however, some physicians do not accept collaborative relationships. [Twenty two states do not require this agreement](#). If NPs were allowed to act independently, more Arkansans would have access to health care for mental health problems.

Allowing NPs to have full practice authority in other states has led to decreased suicide rates and other mental-health-related mortalities. According to professors Alexander and Schnell from the Chicago Federal Reserve and Northwestern University respectively, [in 2014, 1596 mental-health-related deaths were averted in states that allowed NPs to prescribe drugs independently](#). A 2018 study from Montana State University published by the American Enterprise Institute showed that [using NPs as providers decreased the cost of services by between 11% to 29% with no decrease in the quality of care](#). The lower price and additional health care providers caused an increase in health care utilization.

Mental illness in Arkansas is an issue that needs to be addressed. Allowing NPs to act independently will give more Arkansans access to mental health care. Rural Arkansans would see much of the benefit from allowing NPs to practice independently. According to Professors Alexander and Schnell, [unlike psychiatrists and physicians, nurse practitioners are more likely to locate in rural areas](#). In 2016, [NPs accounted for 25% of the primary care service in rural areas](#).

The stress, anxiety, and uncertainty caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic and social distancing adversely affect mental health. A Kaiser Family Foundation poll finds [nearly half \(45%\) of adults across the country say that worry and stress related to the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic are hurting their mental health](#). In a recent [interview with the Washington Post](#), Ms. Kathy HoganBrien, a clinical psychologist who specializes in anxiety disorders, said that this kind of situation causes a “forced

depression” because it disrupts plans for future that normally give people hope. She explains that since depression is the feeling of hopelessness about the future, many people are probably feeling depressed right now. Our lives are disrupted. Because of these disruptions [Americans are currently at a higher risk for mental health related issues.](#) Nurse practitioners can help solve this problem. Now more than ever, we need nurse practitioners to help provide mental health care and alleviate the strain on mental health caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic.