

## **Senate signs off on nurse practitioner bill it sees as prescription for doctor shortage**

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With access to health care becoming an increasing problem particularly in rural parts of Pennsylvania, the state Senate on Wednesday took a step toward addressing that problem by passing a bill permitting nurse practitioners to provide health care independent of a doctor.

By a vote of 39-10, the chamber embraced a measure that would allow nurse to practice on their own after fulfilling a three-year, 3,600-hour formal agreement with a doctor.

"There's a crisis brewing in terms of access to basic health care services that all patients need," said the bill's sponsor Sen. Camera Bartolotta, R-Washington County.

"There are not enough doctors willing to practice in smaller communities and as older doctors retire, fewer new doctors are coming in to replace them. Thankfully, there is a solution that holds the promise of easing this looming health care catastrophe."

Pennsylvania has an army of nurse practitioners who stand ready to fill the void if they can be unshackled from the current law's requirement that they practice under a collaboration agreement with a physician at all times.

"This legislation is especially important in both rural and urban underserved areas where few physicians are available to enter contractual agreements with nurse practitioners," said AARP Pennsylvania State Director Bill Johnston-Walsh. "Pennsylvania currently has 10,000 nurse practitioners--it's time that we let them reach their full potential."

Sen. Kim Ward, R-Westmoreland County, who was among those who opposed it, noted that no hearings were held on the bill to vet some of the concerns raised about it.

"I believe there are some issues in this bill that need to be addressed or we will have some unintended consequences," she said. She voiced her hope that the House will hold hearings and address the problems that opponents had with it.

Her bill, which also has the backing of the Hospital and Health system Association of Pennsylvania among other groups, is modeled after one that former state Sen. Pat Vance, R-Cumberland County, championed in the last legislative session. It also passed the Senate with some opposition but died due to inaction in the House.

Twenty-two states have given nurse practitioners full practice authority.