

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Improving Administrative Processes at the Nursing and Medical Commissions

The Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission and Washington Medical Commission work in tandem with the Department of Health to ensure physicians and nurses are providing quality healthcare. Although the Department of Health establishes administrative procedures, requirements and fees, discipline and standards of practice (including establishing, monitoring and enforcing qualifications for licensure) lie fully with the commissions. Commissioners for both organizations are appointed by the governor. The Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission's 15 members are responsible for approving curriculum and establishing minimum standards for nursing schools, establishing criteria for licensing, determining examination requirements and reviewing disciplinary cases. The Medical Commission's 21 members establish, monitor and enforce qualifications for licensure, consistent standards of practice and continuing competency.

Stakeholders are concerned about a systemic licensure backlog problem at both the nursing and medical commissions. The backlog predates the COVID-19 pandemic, although it exacerbated an already endemic problem in the paper-based documentation system. The procedures during the pandemic called for employees to work under limited in-person office hours; in addition, background checks that required fingerprints could not be processed because police precincts and FBI offices were closed.

With a backlog of licensure and investigation paperwork at both commissions during an unprecedented need for healthcare workers, Governor Inslee directed Department of Health staff to help commission employees process delayed paperwork—a move that stakeholders say started clearing backlogs, but meanwhile delayed new license applications.

Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission

Stakeholders have expressed specific concerns about burdensome licensure requirements for nurses from other states who want to practice in Washington. Most other healthcare professionals in Washington are part of interstate agreements that allow them to practice in certain other states without applying for new licensure. These agreements are reciprocal, which allows healthcare professionals from those states to practice in Washington.

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Widely supported legislation proposed in 2020 and 2021 would have required Washington nurses to participate in a similar interstate agreement; doing so might have also improved licensure backlog issues and nursing shortages. However, due to various stakeholder concerns, it did not pass. In 2021, the Legislature dedicated funding through Senate Bill 5092 for the Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission to undergo a performance audit examining licensing times for out-of-state applicants.

Preliminary scope and objectives

The audit seeks to answer the following questions concerning the Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission:

- How long does this commission take to process licenses for out-of-state applicants?
- What could this commission do to improve licensing processes for out-of-state applicants?

Medical Commission

In addition to their concerns about the licensing backlog, stakeholders raised other issues around the Medical Commission's disciplinary processes. They include the problems physicians have in obtaining meaningful, timely information about the status of their cases, and consistency in the processes the commission uses to adjudicate disciplinary cases.

In 2021, the Legislature instructed the Medical Commission to undergo a performance audit examining licensing times and disciplinary processes.

Preliminary scope and objectives

The audit seeks to answer the following questions concerning the Medical Commission:

- How long does this commission take to process licenses for applicants?
- What could this commission do to improve licensing processes?
- How does this commission's disciplinary processes compare to those of other states?
- What could this commission do to improve its disciplinary processes?

Additional information

We plan to engage an external audit firm to perform this audit. The contractors will publish two reports – one report for each commission – detailing their findings.