

GAO: HHS Should Publish National Health Care Workforce Projections, Take Steps to Analyze Possible Provider Shortages

Executive Summary

On October 30, 2013, GAO released a report examining the federal government's effort to assess and project the needs of the nation's health care workforce. GAO has said that "up-to-date workforce estimates are essential given the significant federal investment in health care training programs." A prior GAO report (GAO-13-709R) found that four federal departments administered 91 programs in FY 2012 that supported postsecondary training or education specifically for direct care health professionals at a cost to taxpayers of \$14.2 billion.

Why GAO Did This Study

- For more than a decade, government, academic, and health professional organizations have projected national shortages of health care professionals, which GAO says "could adversely affect patients' access to care." However, there is little consensus about the nature and extent of future shortages, partly because of the complexity of creating projections and uncertainty about future health care system changes.
- The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for monitoring health care workforce adequacy. To accomplish this, HRSA conducts and contracts for health care workforce studies.

How GAO Did This Study

- This report examines the actions HRSA has taken to project the future supply of and demand for physicians, physician assistants, and advanced practice registered nurses since publishing its 2008 report. Since 2008, HRSA has awarded five contracts to research organizations to update national workforce projections.
- GAO reviewed HRSA's contract documentation, select delivered products, and timeline goals for publication. GAO also interviewed HRSA officials, workforce researchers, and provider organizations.

What GAO Found

- Despite spending about \$2 M on studies since 2008, the most recent projections from HRSA publicly available to inform health care workforce policy are based on data from 2000.
- HRSA missed its goal of publishing one report by December 2012 projecting the supply of and demand for health care professionals through 2025. HRSA officials attributed the delay in publishing this report to data challenges and modeling limitations. As a result of missing deadlines internally, HRSA has also postponed other health care workforce reports.
- HRSA officials admitted they do not have written procedures for preparing a report for publication, which may impede its ability to accurately predict how long products will take to review and monitor their progress through the review process.

Key Findings and Excerpts

Numerous Studies Have Already Projected Workforce Shortages

- “In 2008, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) —the agency within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) responsible for monitoring the supply of and demand for health care professionals—published a physician workforce report that projected a shortfall of approximately 49,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) physicians by 2020.”
- “The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) projected a gap of 124,000 FTE physicians by 2025.”
- “Several health care workforce researchers have published estimates of the effects of PPACA insurance coverage expansions on workforce supply and demand. These studies found varying estimates for the number of additional primary care providers required to meet the needs of the newly insured population, ranging from 4,300 to 8,000 providers. The variations in these projections are the result of differences in methodologies and assumptions used in modeling.”
- “[The Association of American Medical Colleges] also increased its overall projection of physician shortages for 2025 by 6,200 FTE physicians, on the basis of expected increases in health care demand as a result of greater rates of insurance coverage under PPACA, among other factors.”

Congress Needs To Know Obamacare’s Impact on the Health Workforce

- “Health care workforce projections play a critical role in providing information on future shortages or surpluses of health care professionals so that policies can be adjusted, including targeting health care training funds to the areas of greatest need.”
- “HRSA and others attempting to develop new projections must also account for a changing health care landscape, due in part to the implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), as amended by the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that PPACA will extend health insurance coverage to 25 million uninsured individuals beginning in 2014.”
- “Up-to-date workforce estimates are essential information for Congress as it considers policy options to address health care workforce issues, including targeted funding for training programs.”
- “HRSA officials told [GAO] that new models such as Accountable Care Organizations and Patient-Centered Medical Homes have not yet been studied adequately to know whether they will increase or decrease the demand for health care professionals. It may be several years before relevant data are available.”

Shortages of Health Providers “Could Result in Delays in Getting Care”

- “For over a decade, several government, academic, and health professional organizations have projected national shortages of health care professionals, which could result in delays in getting care, or patients not receiving needed care.”

The Health Resources and Services Administration is Failing Taxpayers

- “HRSA is the primary federal agency responsible for ensuring and increasing access to health care services, particularly for medically underserved populations, and for enhancing the capacity of the health care workforce. Within HRSA, the Bureau of Health Professions (BHP) has multiple responsibilities related to workforce development, including conducting and contracting for studies on the supply of and demand for health care professionals.”
- “In the absence of published projections, policymakers are denied the opportunity to use timely information from HRSA to inform their decisions on where to direct billions of dollars in training funds.”
- HRSA is now making larger financial investments in new workforce projection models, but in the absence of standard written processes specifying how the reports resulting from these models will be reviewed, HRSA may be hindered in its ability to monitor the development of these reports and ensure that they are published in keeping with its revised timeline.”
- “In 2006, [GAO] found that HRSA had published few national workforce projections despite the importance of such assessments to setting health care workforce policy.”
- “HRSA officials said that the agency does not have a standard written work plan or set of procedures for accomplishing the tasks necessary to prepare a report for publication after final reports are delivered from contractors....In addition, officials said that it is common for milestone dates to change depending on the complexity of the issues raised during review....Without standard procedures, agency officials may not be able to accurately predict how long products will take to review or to monitor their progress through the review process to ensure they are completed in a timely manner.”

HRSA Reports Are Late, Outdated, With One Report In “Review” for 3 Years

- “While HRSA created a timeline for publishing new projection reports in 2012, the agency has since revised its timeline to postpone publication of two other health care workforce reports after failing to meet its December 2012 publication goal for a clinician specialty report projecting the supply of and demand for health care professionals through 2025. Other reports that have been delivered by contractors since HRSA published its last report in 2008 have either been set aside or are still being reviewed.”
- “HRSA itself has stated that physician workforce projections should be completed at least 10 years in advance to provide enough time for policy interventions to influence the size and composition of the workforce. In the case of the primary care workforce report containing projections to 2020, review has been ongoing for 3 years. If this report were published in 2013, it would project only 7 years into the future.”
- “In the absence of published projections, policymakers are denied the opportunity to use timely information from HRSA to inform their decisions on where to direct billions of dollars in training funds.”
- “Currently, the most recent projections available from HRSA are based on patterns of utilization and care delivery in 2000, predating PPACA by a decade.”
- “HRSA is now making larger financial investments in new workforce projection models, but in the absence of standard written processes specifying how the reports resulting from these models will be reviewed, HRSA may be hindered in its ability to monitor the development of these reports and ensure that they are published in keeping with its revised timeline.”