

Gov. Dave Heineman has designated Nov. 11-17 as Nurse Practitioner (NP) week in Nebraska to recognize the 837 nurse practitioners licensed in Nebraska.

Nurse practitioners, who diagnose and treat illnesses, manage chronic disease, and prescribe medication, have completed graduate-level education—either a master's or doctoral degree—and 500 hours of clinical training.

To become licensed to practice in Nebraska, nurse practitioners hold national certification in specialty areas such as family, women's health, mental health, pediatrics, adult/gerontology primary care, and adult/gerontology.

Experts are predicting an even greater need for NPs as the Affordable Care Act is implemented into practice. With the Affordable Care Act, many patients who were previously uninsured will enter the health care system and will require routine medical and preventive care.

Nearly two-thirds of Nebraska nurse practitioners work in hospitals (41.8 percent), physician's offices or health clinics (26.7 percent), ambulatory care (8.2 percent), or nursing education (7.8 percent).

The need for NPs in mental health is especially great, she said.

Almost 40 percent of Nebraska's mental health professionals are over age 65.

Many will retire within the next 10 years. Great demand for NPs also exists in the state's rural counties. Currently, 51 of Nebraska's 93 counties are officially designated as primary care health professional shortage areas.

She said physicians throughout Nebraska are expanding their practices with nurse practitioners. "The need for NPs in the state of Nebraska is expanding," Dr. Waltman said. "The number of physicians and nurse practitioners in Nebraska per capita is below the national average."