



The Senate of Texas

KEVIN SPARKS

DISTRICT 31

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, January 23, 2025

Contact: Mattie Garland
mattie.garland@senate.texas.gov
Ph: 512-463-0131

STATE SENATOR SPARKS FILES FIRST 89th PRIORITY LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE ON HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE

[Austin, TX] – Senator Kevin Sparks (R-Midland) announced his first of six legislative priority packages, aimed at addressing the growing shortage of healthcare professionals in rural areas, West Texas, and across the state. Texas faces a critical shortage of healthcare professionals from primary care physicians to mental health professionals. These gaps lead to delayed care, poorer health outcomes, and increased strain on existing healthcare systems. Senator Sparks’ package targets these challenges by expanding access to care through reducing regulatory strains and barriers of entry for doctors, leveraging telehealth accessibility, while also incentivizing training and expediting licensure for mental health professionals. Senator Sparks’ 89th Legislative Priorities on ‘Healthcare Workforce’ consist of the following pieces of legislation:

SB 881: The DOCTOR Act: Removes barriers of entry and reduces regulations that limit workforce participation by improving pathways for graduate physicians, former military doctors, and international physicians.

SB 498: Interstate Counseling Compact: Admits Texas into the Interstate Counseling Compact to expedite licensing, provide continuity of care, and improve access to mental health services.

SB 471: Expanding Telehealth Access: Allows Texas residents to utilize out-of-state telehealth providers to grow marketplace competition and improve access to telehealth workforce.

SB 469: Mental Health Training Reimbursements: Provides mental healthcare professional reimbursements for training to incentivize increased workforce interest in need of growing mental health demands.

“Texas healthcare workforce is in the midst of a crisis. This legislative package ensures that families in West Texas and beyond have the healthcare professionals they need,” said Senator Sparks. “West Texas is home to some of the hardest-working people in the state, but too many families face challenges accessing the healthcare required to live. This legislative package is a bold step toward ensuring every Texan has access to skilled, compassionate care. By reducing regulations for physicians, expanding telehealth, and removing barriers for mental health professionals, we can build a stronger healthcare workforce and a healthier future for our communities both in Senate District 31 and across the great state of Texas.”

The following pages detail each bill regarding background, key provisions, and statements of supports.



The Senate of Texas

KEVIN SPARKS

DISTRICT 31

SB 881 – THE DOCTOR ACT

(DECREASING OCCUPATIONAL CERTIFICATION TIMELINES, OBSTACLES & REGULATIONS)

Background

In May of 2022, the Department of State Health Services issued the Physician Supply & Demand Projections 2021-2032, detailing the current shortage of physicians in Texas and how this shortage will continue to increase through 2032. Texas alone is expected to be short 20,420 doctors, and currently, 29.4% of Texas physicians are within retirement range. Contributing to this issue, Texas has only 334 primary care residency slots annually, and 45.2% of those residents practice out of state.

Key Provisions

This bill addresses burdensome regulations that prevent physicians from providing care in Texas. Additionally, this bill requires the Texas Medical Board to create pathways for new physicians to enter the market and serve Texans through the following ways: (1) remove residency requirements for qualified international physicians; (2) utilize trained military veteran physicians by establishing a long-term licensure pathway; and (3) provide access to training and primary practice for medical school graduates who do not receive a residency match.

Statements of Support

“I am proud to sponsor the DOCTOR Act in the Texas House. The key to addressing healthcare shortages in our state lies in expanding access to physicians. The DOCTOR Act leaves no stone unturned where it comes to increasing access to high-quality physicians by leveraging this multifaceted and innovative approach.” - **State Representative Tom Oliverson, MD, Texas House District 130**

“I want to commend Senator Sparks and his staff for thinking outside the box in coming up with ways to address the shortage of physicians in rural parts of Texas. In the two years he has been my senator, he has shown a strong commitment to improving health care for his constituents, and he has made health care access in rural areas one of his top priorities. With the DOCTOR Act, Senator Sparks has come up with innovative ways to increase the number of physicians in rural areas, while having safeguards in place to make sure quality of care and patient safety are not compromised in any way. Thank you, Senator Sparks.” - **Dr. Vivek Rao - Ector County Physician**

“Texas has the 2nd worst physician shortage and maldistribution problem in the nation. If left unaddressed, millions of Texans will continue to see their physical access to care decrease--a recipe for worse health outcomes, more non-medical delays in care, and rising astronomical medical bills. The policies within the DOCTOR Act stand to attract top-tier international medical talent to practice in underserved rural communities while simultaneously creating more training opportunities for both, veterans wanting to go into civilian medical practice, and Texas medical graduates needing to match into a residency program.” - **Tanner Aliff, Visiting Research Fellow - Paragon Health Institute**

“As a physician practicing in Texas, I applaud the Texas Senate for their continued initiative of seriously addressing the fact that Texas needs more physicians. By streamlining the licensure processes and reducing barriers for recent medical graduates, military families, and internationally licensed physicians, we can quickly ensure that more communities in Texas have access to the medical care they need.” - **Dr. Clifford Porter, MD PhD, Senior Fellow - Texas Public Policy Foundation**



The Senate of Texas

KEVIN SPARKS

DISTRICT 31

SB 498 – INTERSTATE COUNSELING COMPACT

Background

As of July 2024, 246 of Texas' 254 counties are designated as federal mental health professional shortage areas. Over the previous two sessions, the legislature has prioritized mental health funding, with new facilities planned for West Texas, including the Amarillo State Hospital and the Permian Basin Behavioral Health Center. Addressing workforce shortages is critical, as 145 counties have fewer than 10 Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs), and 29 counties have none. LPCs are projected to comprise 72% of Texas' clinical mental health workforce, and Texas is currently one of 13 states not part of the Interstate Counseling Compact.

Key Provisions

This bill would allow Texas to join the Interstate Licensed Professional Counselors Compact, expediting licensure for LPCs, aiding military families, improving access to care, expanding service areas, and ensuring continuity of care. The Compact, governed by a commission of member states, will begin issuing privileges in Spring 2025.

Statements of Support

“The Interstate Counseling Compact will provide a crucial pathway to expand the mental health workforce in Texas by streamlining licensing requirements and allowing counselors to maintain continuity of care. If Texas enters the Compact, our counselors will have the freedom to expand their practice while also increasing the number of counselors available to serve all areas of Texas. SB 498 will deliver the opportunity and autonomy needed to solve our state’s mental health needs.” - **Elke Gonzalez, CEO - Texas Counseling Association**

“In the last two legislative sessions, the State of Texas made powerful statements about the importance of behavioral health, and authorized unprecedented levels of new investment to carry out that mandate. The Permian Basin region was the beneficiary of that commitment, and we are combining state funding with over \$100 million in private funding to create a new 200-bed facility to be known as Permian Basin Behavioral Health Center. Our ability to fulfill our mission to offer comprehensive behavioral health services to our region depends on our success in building a behavioral health workforce. While we recognize and are working closely with private funders and our local higher education providers to build our own local resources, there is no question that we will benefit greatly from enhancement of our ability to successfully recruit existing providers. Implementation of the multi-state Compact for licensure of professional counselors will have a profound impact on our ability to staff our new facilities and to provide the vital outpatient counseling services needed in every community.” - **Russel Meyers, President - Permian Basin Behavioral Health Center**

“Endeavors proudly supports the Interstate Licensed Professional Counselors Compact as a vital step in addressing mental health provider shortages. By enabling licensed counselors to deliver care across state lines, this initiative expands access for underserved populations, including Veterans, military families, and rural communities. We commend Senator Sparks for championing this life-saving legislation, which fosters continuity of care and empowers mobile workforces.” - **Dr. Priti Mody-Bailey, Chief Medical Officer, Endeavors**



The Senate of Texas

KEVIN SPARKS

DISTRICT 31

SB 471 – EXPANDING TELEHEALTH ACCESS

Background

COVID-19 provided nationwide temporary emergency exemptions for various medical rules and requirements, one of which was interstate telehealth. As the pandemic faded, many states reverted to previous policies on telehealth for out-of-state services. Texas continues to face primary care workforce shortages with the Texas Health Professions Resources Center stating 32 counties have no primary care physicians as of 2021, along with major population growth since that time. Other states have removed the telehealth barrier policy, such as Florida, which in 2023 approved around 14,000 out-of-state providers and within the first two and half years saw no cases that have resulted in disciplinary action.

Key Provisions

This bill would allow out-of-state health professionals to provide telehealth services to Texans. The health professional would need to hold a current and unrestricted license, register with the state, and not be or been subject to a disciplinary proceeding. Additionally, the health professional is subject to required insurance coverage, state court lawsuits, and licensure agency investigation, if necessary.

Statement of Support

“Telehealth has proven to be a game-changer in delivering timely and effective healthcare. By expanding these services, we are not only improving accessibility for our constituents but also ensuring that Texans can receive the care they need, when they need it, without the barriers of distance or transportation. I am committed to working alongside Senator Sparks and all my colleagues to ensure that every Texan has access to quality healthcare through innovative solutions.” - **State Representative Matt Shaheen, Texas House District 66**

“Texas is projected to be short over 10,000 doctors by 2032, 40 counties have no primary care physicians, and 248 counties are deemed mental health care provider shortage areas. Texas has an opportunity to address provider shortages and physical access by allowing out-of-state providers to practice across state lines via telehealth. The longer Texas waits to enact change, the longer patients have to wait for care.” - **Nick Armstrong, Texas Public Policy Foundation**

“Telehealth is a strong alternative way to care for individuals in very rural areas. Many rural areas deal with a shortage of healthcare professionals and by expanding the opportunity to have out of state telehealth providers work in these rural areas gives individuals another option to receive care. TRHA supports SB 471 and the efforts by State Senator Sparks.” - **Kelly Cheek, Texas Rural Health Association**

“Texas families deserve healthcare solutions that work for them. This bill eliminates unnecessary barriers to telehealth services, empowering patients to access high-quality care across state lines while safeguarding the integrity of our healthcare system. It’s a common-sense solution that prioritizes Texans over bureaucracy.” - **Nick James, Texas State Director - Cicero Action**



The Senate of Texas

KEVIN SPARKS

DISTRICT 31

SB 469 - MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING REIMBURSEMENTS

Background

In November 2024, the Texas Health Professions Research Center issued the 2022-203 Behavioral Health Supply and Demand Projection, detailing mental health workforce shortages. Demand in the report argue by 2036, the behavioral health workforce supply is projected to increase by 49% while demand is projected to grow by 73%. Additionally, between 2022 and 2036, the statewide supply of behavioral health care providers is projected to not meet demand. Based on these projections, 27.6% of the projected demand for behavioral health providers in 2036 will not be met. The median providers per 100,000 resident's ratio for rural counties is less than half that of non-rural ones, indicating rural areas have fewer services even when accounting for population differences while a total of 13 rural counties have no providers at all.

Key Provisions

This bill would expand the range of providers eligible to perform medical assistance services, such as licensed marriage and family therapist associates, licensed master social workers, and licensed professional counselor associates to receive Medicaid reimbursement while under clinical supervision. It allows recipients of medical assistance to these professionals working toward full licensure to provide covered services, provided they are legally authorized to do so. Additionally, the bill also establishes reimbursement to these providers at 50% of the rate for licensed psychiatrists or psychologists and is capped at 3,000 hours or the required clinical practice hours for licensure.

Statements of Support

“House Bill 1716 and its companion, Senate Bill 469, provide a timely and cost-effective solution to strengthen the mental health workforce in Texas, especially in the rural and underserved communities I represent. This legislation allows Licensed Professional Counselors and others to bill for a portion of Medicaid patient reimbursements during their required supervised training hours. By doing so, the state can retain more professionals and ensure these critical services remain accessible and sustainable for the communities that need them most. This policy will significantly benefit the Concho Valley and West Texas, and I am eager to work alongside Senator Sparks to see it enacted into law.” - **State Representative Drew Darby, Texas House District 72**

“The significant investments Texas has made in mental health services require a strong, well-trained workforce and pipeline of future providers to effectively serve all Texans. SB 469 by Senator Sparks is an important step toward addressing this critical workforce need by making it easier for mental health professionals to continue and complete their clinical training, ensuring more Texans with mental health needs receive the quality care they need.” - **Andy Keller, President & CEO - Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute**

“As an organization committed to providing mental health services in West Texas, we have witnessed firsthand the growing demand for mental health care, particularly in rural and underserved communities. At this time, WTCG has 425 people on the waitlist for professional counseling. There is an urgent need to expand access to care, and SB 469 provides an important step toward addressing this challenge.” - **Dusty McCoy, CEO - West Texas Counseling**

“NAMI Texas applauds Senator Sparks for introducing SB 469, a critical bill that will increase access to mental health services by strengthening the pipeline of professionals working towards clinical licensure. SB 469 provides an innovative approach to addressing the mental health workforce shortage.” - **Lysette Graham - National Alliance for Mental Illness**