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Shumaker Advisors Played a Vital Role Passing Legislation for Ohio CRNAs Heading to the Front Lines to Care for COVID-19 Patients

RELATED PROFESSIONALS

Joseph M. Hollabaugh, Jr.

MEDIA CONTACT

Wendy M. Byrne

wbyrne@shumaker.com



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Nurse Anesthetists Say Expanded Authority Will Help Combat Virus

The inclusion of language on nurse anesthetists' scope of practice in emergency legislation targeting the coronavirus will help the health care system battle the crisis, an organization representing the professionals says.

The issue of expanding the authority of certified registered nurse anesthetists is one that lawmakers have introduced and debated for years but that has failed to pass due to opposition from physicians and anesthesiologists.

That opposition ended in December, when compromise language to a version of the bill (HB 224) was accepted that allows supervising physicians to opt out of the expanded authority for CRNAs.

The measure passed the House with overwhelming support in January and appeared set for quick approval in the Senate before concerns around COVID-19 brought most legislative activity to a halt.

Instead, the issue reached its legislative conclusion last week when the language was included in an emergency measure focused on the novel coronavirus (HB 197). Governor Mike DeWine signed the bill Friday.

"It's exciting. It has been a long process that has been vetted through," Chuck Tabbert, president of the Ohio

State Association of Nurse Anesthetists, said in an interview. "It was nice to come to an agreement with the Ohio State Medical Association and the (Ohio Society of Anesthesiologists) to make that happen."

The two groups had long voiced concerns that the legislation's expanded ordering authority for CRNAs could jeopardize patient health by causing confusion. They said in December that the compromise maintains physician involvement and oversight to ensure quality of care for patients.

Mr. Tabbert said the conclusion to this journey couldn't have come at a better time. CRNAs are vital frontline workers in the battle against the novel coronavirus – a respiratory condition that requires procedures such as intubation.

"We're frequently relied on as the airway expert in many hospitals across Ohio," he said.

Although representatives from smaller rural hospitals testified during the committee process that the measure will help them provide quality care in the absence of anesthesiologists, Mr. Tabbert said it will help hospitals all over the state.

"CRNAs are being used in this COVID pandemic to use those same skills in the emergency rooms and the ICUs," he said.

"The timing is perfect," he added. "As these patients present to emergency rooms and in ICUs with life-threatening respiratory complications, they need to be intubated by people who are skilled in that to prevent the transmission of COVID-19."