Nurses face delays in obtaining new state license

September 17, 2013 (WLS) -- Delays in approving new medical licenses in Illinois are causing problems for some nurses and other health care professionals. Without that license, they cannot go to work.

Coming from a family of nurses and seeing her mother though two bouts of cancer, Deborah Lehr was thrilled to get a job offer to be a surgical nurse for cancer patients in Illinois.

"I'm ready to work," said Deborah Lehr, nurse.

But the Wisconsin nurse missed her first days of work because she has not received her Illinois license.

"It not only hurt me but hurt the people I left and potentially hurting the people expecting me to join them today. Overall it's not a very good situation," said Lehr.

Lehr says she sent a permanent application with finger prints for a background check on July 22. At that time, she says the state estimated the wait to be 4-5 weeks.

Still without a license, she sent another application for temporary license on August 18. The Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation licenses 1 million professionals, including nurses.

The chief medical coordinator for the department says recent retirements and reassignments have left the nurse licensing staff short, and it is now 34 days on average to get a new nurse license.

He would not discuss any particular applicant, but emphasizes the need to thoroughly check applicants.

"We are trying to work with new assignments and new technology to get back on track and to get little bit faster about licensing. We like to get closer to 15 days for all professions," said Dr. Brian Zachariah, Illinois Department of Financial & Professional Regulation.

The executive director of the Illinois Nurses Association says with a nursing shortage projected until 2018, she hopes the state will take measures to speed the process.

"That process is as smooth as possible and we are not creating additional headaches or barriers for nurses completing those processes," said Alice Johnson, Illinois Nurses Association.

Earlier this year, the Department of Financial and Professional Regulation got emergency relief from the state to hire more staff to process physician licenses. Medical licensing is currently done the old-fashioned way, on paper, but all renewals are done electronically. The department says it is trying to make all licensing electronic.

Nurse Lehr warns other nurses to anticipate more time for licensing and not to quit your current job until the new license is in order.