

## Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network Examples of Findings from Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics

From October 5 to November 8, 2020, representatives from dentist offices and dental clinics answered five questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their organization. Themes from their responses are highlighted below. To see their full responses as well as summaries from Spring 2020, go to [www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19). On the following pages are summaries of responses to other Sentinel Network questions.

### Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reported by dentist offices and dental clinics : Themes and examples

#### Have there been overall staffing changes at your facility due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

**THEMES:** Mandated closure of dental offices led to staff reductions. Now that offices are open, creative scheduling and staffing solutions are necessary.

- *Increasing number of days worked, to spread patient load out over time/space, required split staffing to cover all days with adequate staffing.*
- *We let go 2 staff members and were working at 50% compacity. We are still not at 100% 6 months later.*
- *Less hours available from staff and providers due to home schooling, and daycare options.*
- *We had to hire additional staff to see our normal patient volume, due to the health screenings of all patients.*

#### Were any of your staff disproportionately affected by COVID-19?

**THEMES:** Lower-wage staff and those who needed childcare or had risk factors were the most affected.

- *Staff with kids in elementary and middle school age.*
- *Those with children and pre-existing health concerns seem to have been more affected.*
- *Hygienist only, DDS & Dental Assistant schedule had no change.*

#### What about the staffing arrangements at your facility made it easier or harder to respond to the pandemic?

**THEMES:** Meeting regulatory and patient requirements after the mandatory shutdown has been challenging.

- *Office/operator square footage and distancing requirements requiring staff reduction, plus increased cleaning protocols have reduced overall productivity and revenue. At times it is difficult to guarantee full time hours due to distancing requirements and required reduction in patient volume.*
- *My job is very stressful and overwhelming now due to the fact we missed 576 hygiene appointments for being closed for 9 weeks. Playing catch up has been really hard. Almost every one of the patients I see are 9 to 12 months overdue!*
- *The 'F' word (flexibility) has always been a hallmark of our staff. Once the fears of prolonged closure and concerns over income were allayed, response and accommodations to new hours/roles has been good.*

#### As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, what are your top workforce needs that could be alleviated by new or modified policy, regulatory, and/or payment rules?

**THEMES:** There is a need for more dental hygienists. Also, better coordination of pandemic response.

- *We need to open more hygiene schools and/or increase the number of graduates. Hygiene credentials should be transferrable between states.*
- *Is there a way to get more potential hygienist graduates out into employment? Perhaps by allowing in-office mentorship in lieu of on-campus in-person training? Could dentists somehow identify/sponsor a student so that upon graduation, that hygienist would come to their office?*
- *Clearer COVID-19 policies in one place to get same message across everywhere what procedures are.*

#### Describe the workforce impact, if any, of the use of telehealth at your facility in response to the pandemic.

**THEMES:** Telehealth can be used for some tasks, but not as helpful for dental practices as for other health care settings

- *We used telehealth for assessment of patients needs before entering the practice.*
- *It was helpful in emergency cases where the dentist could prescribe antibiotics and refer to specialists for treatment as needed. You can't do a lot of dental care with telehealth.*
- *We have not adopted any telehealth in our office. I don't think it would help in our occupation due the need to physically examine teeth and make adjustments at each appointment.*

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 2020)

Representatives from dentist offices and dental clinics provided information to the Washington State Health Workforce Sentinel Network nine times between Summer 2016 and Fall 2020. This summary highlights some of the information they provided, with an emphasis on the most recently submitted data. Additional findings from dentist offices and dental clinics can be found on the Sentinel Network dashboard ([wa.sentinelnetwork.org](http://wa.sentinelnetwork.org)) as well as for other types of health care facilities.

### Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics - Occupations with exceptionally long vacancies: 2018-2020

Top occupations cited as having exceptionally long vacancies by date of reporting*					
Rank	Summer 2018	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Fall 2020
1	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant
					Dental hygienist
2	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	No additional occupations reported
3	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist	
				Office personnel	
4	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Office personnel	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	

← Most cited

\*Responses prior to Summer 2018 not shown due to low response counts

### Demand for healthcare workforce reported by dentist offices and dental clinics (Fall 2020)

**The mandatory closure of dental clinics and fewer patients after reopening led to lower demand for hygienists.**

- We are operating at around 75% capacity.
- Our schedule isn't as full as it normally would be this time of year.

**Other employers are playing catch-up and are finding it difficult to fill vacancies**

- [Dental assistant & dental hygienist] Catching up dental care not provided during COVID-19 pandemic.
- With one less hygienist in our office, it has been hard to work through the back-log of patients that had their cleanings postponed.
- [Dental assistant] It has been hard to find part-time DAs to cover when any of our full-time DAs can't come in to work for any reason. Sometimes there are also childcare issues due to schools doing remote education.

### Reasons for vacancies reported by dentist offices and dental clinics

**Employers report that people are reluctant to work in an environment they perceive as high-risk.**

- [Dental hygienist] Temporary staffing agency reports that hygienists are "afraid" to come back to work in a dental office. Also, they were offered the extra \$600/week unemployment and many of them have kids and need to stay home to home school.
- Many hygienists choosing to retire early rather than work under covid-19 conditions. Even at least one of those we had employed chose not to work, even with increased cleaning, ventilation, and PPE protocols.
- [Dental assistant] Some choosing to leave DA work for other 'lower exposure risk' employment opportunities.

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 2020)

### New roles for existing employees and new occupations hired by dentist offices and dental clinics

- [Dental hygienist] Sometimes hygienist has to work without an assistant to chart and take x-rays due to decreased staffing for social distancing requirements. This decreases productivity.
- To keep staff working and paid during shut downs, we had dental assistants do clerical and deeper cleaning that they would not have normally done previously. Receptionist has had to learn to take temperatures and ask covid-19 exposure/risk questions when scheduling and reminding patients of appointments.

### Reasons for worker retention/turnover problems reported by dentist offices and dental clinics

Some turnover issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but other issues were present before the pandemic.

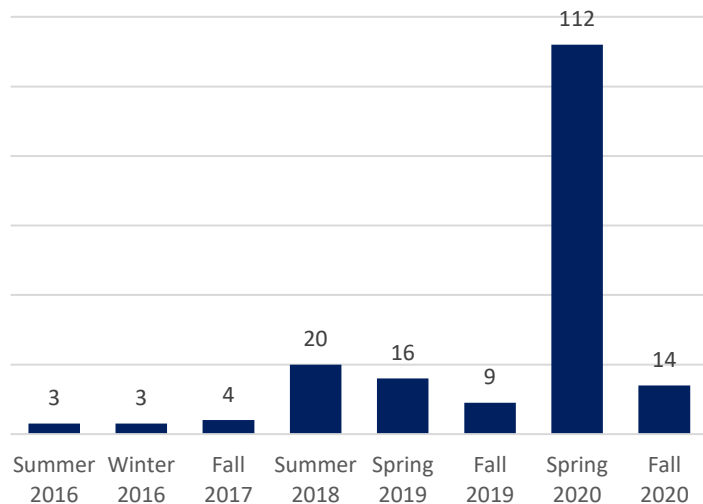
- COVID-19 protocol has affected some of our turnover and also we are running our clinic at half capacity.
- Lost a dental assistant due to kids not going back to the classroom in person.
- [Dental hygienist] Staff pregnancy, and not coming back to work after pregnancy.

### Changes in dentist offices and dental clinics' priorities regarding orientation/onboarding for new employees and training for existing/incumbent workers

Content focused primarily on COVID-19 protocols. Changes to the way information was delivered.

- Fit testing for N 95's and most of our in-service/required training online.
- More remote interviews and digital exchange of documentation that used to take place in person.
- New PPE, and new screening, and new aerosol procedure protocols.

**Number of Sentinel Network Responses from Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics in WA by Data Collection Date\***



\* Spring 2017 (zero responses) not shown due to space constraints

**Number of Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics Responses by Accountable Community of Health (ACH) (Fall 2020)**



### About the Washington Health Workforce Sentinel Network

The Sentinel Network links the healthcare sector with policymakers, workforce planners and educators to identify and respond to changing demand for healthcare workers, with a focus on identifying newly emerging skills and roles required by employers. The Sentinel Network is an initiative of Washington's Health Workforce Council, conducted collaboratively by Washington's Workforce Board and the University of Washington's Center for Health Workforce Studies. Funding to initiate the Sentinel Network came from the Healthier Washington initiative, with ongoing support from Governor Inslee's office and the Washington State Legislature.

#### **Why become a Sentinel? As a Sentinel, you can:**

- Communicate your workforce needs and ensure that the state is prepared to respond to the transforming healthcare environment.
- Have access to current and actionable information about emerging healthcare workforce needs.
- Compare your organization's experience and emerging workforce demand trends with similar employer groups.

To view an interactive summary of findings and to provide information from your organization: [www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org).

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