

## Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network *Findings Briefs: Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics*

This Findings Brief highlights current workforce needs reported by dentist offices and dental clinics in Washington State during October and November 2021. More findings from 2021 and earlier may be viewed at [www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/). Dentist offices' and dental clinics' current pandemic-related concerns are summarized below. Earlier pandemic-related findings may be viewed at [www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19/](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19/).

### Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reported by Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics: Themes and examples

#### How have your facility's staffing arrangements/configurations affected your ability to respond to patient demand during the past 6 months?

Most reports indicate that staff shortages limit the number of patients that can be seen.

- We have to cut 40-50% of pts we can put in our schedule for both dentists and hygienists. We [also have] to increase \$2-3/hr for all staff members to be certain we don't lose more staff.
- Our patients schedule 6 months ahead for their hygiene visits, yet we don't have a hygienist to see those patients. We have had to reschedule/cancel countless appointments as a result.
- If a staff member has any symptoms of illness, it is very hard to replace them or find a temporary person to fill in to meet demand while that employee is out for covid testing.
- We cannot see as many patients due to staff shortages. This leads to lost revenue. With higher wage demands, and low insurance reimbursements, the current model may not be sustainable.

#### What are your top workforce needs that could be alleviated by policy, regulatory, and/or payment changes?

- Increased training/education/certification programs available for dental hygienists. We need to increase the workforce.
- Take away the pandemic unemployment assistance from the state as there are many jobs available.
- Make licensure for dental hygienists not dependent on nitrous oxide certification and restorative certification.
- We need to be able to pay our assistants a livable wage, insurance PPO's reimbursement rates are below inflation.
- Allow out of state hygienists to work in WA and allow assistants to be trained for simple hygiene procedures.

#### How has the pandemic affected your ability to support educational/training opportunities?

Most have not been able to train students during the pandemic. Some report having capacity but no available students.

- We are struggling to stay afloat, offering education and training is not an option.
- Externships have been limited due to COVID protocols and patients being wary of having too many observers.
- I have reached out to dental assistant schools to see if they need any help from me but unfortunately they have no students who are enrolling.

#### To what extent has your organization used recruitment incentives like sign-on bonuses during the pandemic?

##### What recruitment strategies have been most successful?

Many have not offered sign-on bonuses. Those that have report mixed results.

- No sign-on bonuses. Competitive higher base pay to attract candidates..
- We don't play games with our employees. Sign on bonuses [only] work when long term employment is not the goal.
- Tried it. It helps but as other offices do the same things, we inevitably return to the same problems of reduced supply.

#### Have you implemented new retention strategies during the pandemic? Please describe.

Retention strategies of many types, including increased wages, were commonly reported.

- We have tried to be flexible with employees availability to work, allowing more time off. We have extended compensation and benefits.
- Higher salaries, 401k, PTO [Paid Time Off].
- We have given multiple raises to try to retain existing employees.

#### Compared with 2 years ago, how would you describe the number of vacancies you're now trying to fill?

Significantly higher vacancy numbers were commonly reported, due to turnover and lower numbers of applicants among other reasons.

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 2021)

Between 2016 and 2021, over the course of 11 reporting periods, Dentist Offices, Dental Clinics, and other health care facilities in Washington shared information about their workforce needs to the Washington State Health Workforce Sentinel Network. Below are highlights of trends over time and recent findings. More findings from Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics, along with those from other health care facilities, are at [wa.sentinelnetwork.org](http://wa.sentinelnetwork.org).

Top occupations cited as having exceptionally long vacancies by date of reporting								
Rank	Summer 2018*	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	
1	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental Hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	
					Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist		
2	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	No additional occupations reported	Dentist	Dental hygienist	
3	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist		Office personnel	Office personnel	Dentist
				Medicaid navigator				
4	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Office personnel	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency		No additional occupations reported	Administrative personnel	

← 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

#### Reports that patients are returning after delaying care at the same time that dentists are having trouble hiring.

- [Dental hygienist, Dental assistant] With COVID-19 shut downs we now have a wave of patients who have been delaying care all trying to come in at once. This has led to high demands on dental offices for dental appointments.
- [Dental assistant, Administrative personnel] Patient care volume has increased, requiring additional personnel.
- [Dental hygienist, Dental assistant] We are still working through the backlog of procedures that were delay[ed] during COVID shutdown/slowdown. And our efficiency is lower due to additional sanitation procedures.
- [Dental hygienist] Most applicants are looking for temp work. Due to high demand and low supply wage demands are rising at an unsustainable rate.
- [Multiple occupations] Lost employees due to state vaccine mandate and very few applicants are coming forward.

### Reasons for vacancies reported by Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics

#### Employers report that there aren't enough applicants and increased demand for employees has created competition to hire those who do apply.

- [Dental hygienist] Shortage in hygienists before COVID and now fewer working and some corporate and large group offices offering very high pay that solo practitioners cannot compete with.
- [Dental hygienist] Very few applicants. Those applicants who apply are usually straight out of school who require significant training and also demand extremely high wages.
- [Dental assistant] There has been lack of qualified dental assistants prior to Covid -19 Pandemic and it escalated during pandemic.
- [Dental assistant] Demand is greater than personnel supply. Wage demands are higher than educational and experience level would dictate compared to pre-pandemic levels.
- [Dental hygienist] No one applying. There are currently over 50 dental hygiene positions open in our county.

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 2021)

### New roles for existing employees and new occupations hired by Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics

**Reports that workers at all levels are taking on additional tasks to cover for staff shortages.**

- *[Dentist] Dentist has been forced to substitute for hygienist to fill gaps.*
- *[Dental hygienist] My hygienist has to do more things she's overqualified for since I can't find a dental assistant.*
- *[Dental hygienist] Occasionally a hygienist has assisted me with dental procedure. Hygienist are having to do much more sterilization and cleanup than prior.*
- *I have a dental assistant working at the front desk because I haven't been able to hire a front desk person.*

### Reasons for worker retention/turnover problems reported by Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics

**Many employees reported to leave for higher pay. The vaccine mandate and other COVID-related factors also cited.**

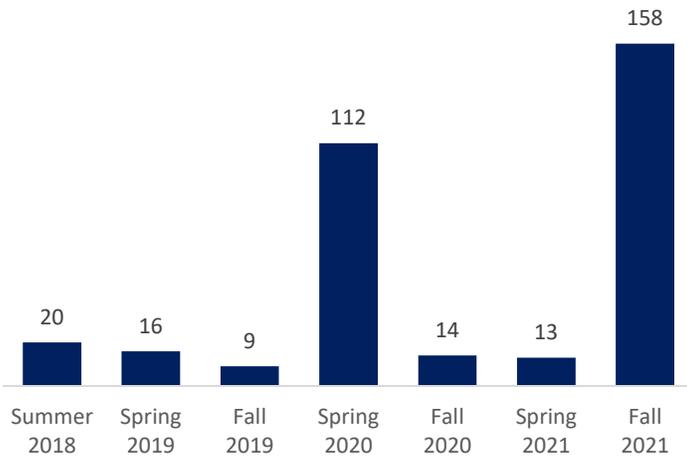
- *[Dental hygienist] Hygienists can temp for very high wages and many choose to do so, and therefore leave the office.*
- *[Dental hygienist, Dental assistant] Many have left the profession due to lack of child care and burnout from working in healthcare during COVID.*
- *[Dental assistant] Some are leaving healthcare in general due to a mandatory vaccine.*

### Changes in Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics' priorities regarding orientation/onboarding for new employees and training for existing/incumbent workers

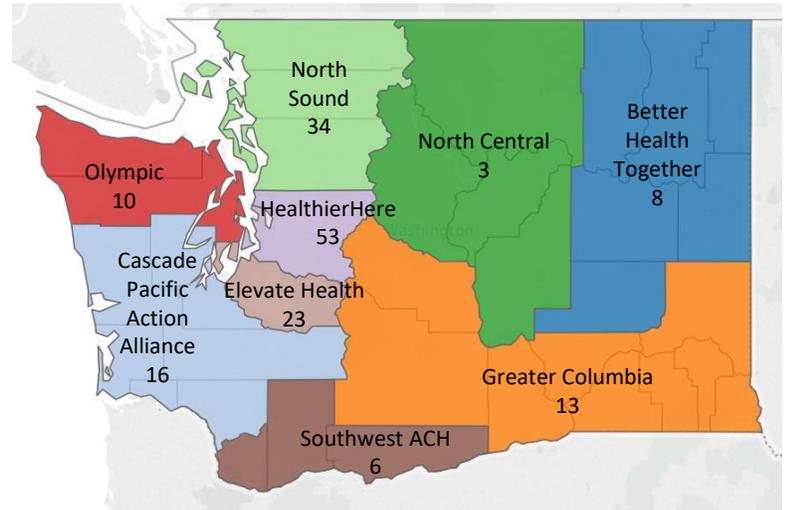
**Content focused primarily on COVID-19 protocols. Many employers are hiring less experienced workers.**

- *[Dental assistant] hired an applicant with less experience and agreed to train her because there were no other applicants.*
- *[Dental assistant] On the job program rather than hiring experienced assistants.*
- *Covid precautions and protocols for employee safety as well as safeguarding patient health.*

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



**Number of Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics Responses by Accountable Community of Health (ACH) (Fall 2021)**



\* Responses prior to Summer 2018 not shown due to space constraints

### About the Washington Health Workforce Sentinel Network

The Health Workforce 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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