

## 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 May and June 2022. More findings from 2022 and earlier may be viewed at [www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings). Dentist offices' and dental clinics' responses to questions about current overarching and pandemic-related workforce issues 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).

### Overarching and Pandemic-Related Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

#### **What strategies has your organization used over the past 6 months to cover worker absences and fill vacancies caused by worker turnover? How successful have these strategies been?**

Some clinics have expanded office hours, rescheduled patients or closed temporarily. Others report using temp agencies and Facebook groups to locate fill-in workers. Many have asked current employees to expand their roles but fear burnout.

- *We have had to reschedule patients and shut down on several occasions as there were insufficient staff to treat patients.*
- *Having other people expand their roles. Short term ok, but it is stressing everyone out.*
- *[Dentists] are performing more traditional hygiene tasks and we are using temp [hygienists] as they are available.*
- *I use a temp agency. This has been awful, because now workers just want to work as temps and do a handful of days per month with no consistency to their schedule.*
- *The contract agencies are in the same deficit and there is no one to hire as a temp. We effectively slow production, reduce how many patients we are able to see and our existing patients wait longer and are unable to be seen for their regular check-ups. With assistants, we get creative and look for less qualified applicants and train.*

#### **What employee benefits are, or would be, the most helpful to improve your facility's ability to retain its workforce? If you have been able to implement or increase access to any of these benefits within the past 6 months what effect have they had on retention?**

- *We have altered our hours to try to help employees manage childcare and long commutes. We compensate our employees well and have excellent benefits.*
- *Current workforce needs better access to quality child care and affordable close housing. Haven't been able to change any of that [so] cannot tell you how it has improved retention.*
- *Benefits don't seem to be the determining factor, it's all about the hourly rate.*
- *#1 thing that needs to happen is increase available people licensed to do the job. There is not enough. Most of us already offer flexible schedules, time off, sick time, holiday pay, retirement matching, medical, dental, vision.*

#### **What are your top workforce needs that could be alleviated by new or modified policies, regulations, and/or payment rules?**

Most suggested strategies to increase the supply of workers. Many argued for increased insurance reimbursement.

- *Need more funding for schools to be able to increase class sizes and produce more graduates that enter the workforce.*
- *Reduced regulation for transfer of licensed Hygienists from other states. Currently, to be licensed in WA state, there are many requirements for procedures that most dental hygienists are not using or needing in a dental office.*
- *Changes in vaccine mandate [and] childcare costs.*
- *Third party payers need to raise reimbursement rates. They have been close to frozen for over 10 years!*
- *Medicaid program needs to increase their fees astronomically.... Otherwise, there will be an exodus of dental providers.*

#### **How would you describe your facility's use of telehealth/virtual visits now compared with your use a year ago? If your organization provides telehealth/virtual visits, how would you describe the impact on recruiting and retaining your workforce?**

Eighty-four percent of respondents said they do not offer telehealth. Those that do offer telehealth report little to no impact on recruiting and retaining workforce.

- *Very little impact... still need to show up to do dentistry.*

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Spring 2022)

Between 2016 and 2022, over the course of 12 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	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	
1	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental Hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	
				Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist			
2	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	No additional occupations reported	Dentist	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	
3	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist		Office personnel	Office personnel	Dentist	Office personnel
			Office personnel			Medicaid navigator		
4	Office personnel	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency		No additional occupations reported	No additional occupations reported	Office personnel	Dentist

← Most cited

\*Responses prior to Spring 2019 not shown due to space constraints

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

Many respondents report a lack of applicants for open positions, especially hygienists and assistants. Often, those that do apply lack experience and/or ask for high wages.

- [Dental hygienist] There have been no applicants for the hygiene position in my office for almost a year, and the starting wages are more than some insurance [reimbursement covers].
- [Dental hygienist] Not enough applicants/graduates, particularly for dental hygienists, because they cannot be trained on the job like most other positions within the dental office. And those that are available... the salary demands are so high that they are not feasible given stagnation of reimbursement rates from insurance companies.
- [Dental hygienist] Washington State makes it exceedingly difficult to advertise/hire out of state licensed workers due to unnecessary inhibitory licensing requirements.
- [Dental assistant] Not enough assistants AND skill levels of those available are mainly entry level.
- [Dental assistant] There is a tremendous shortage of registered assistants, so [we] need to train them ourselves.
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] Had to move dental assistant to front staff position. Due to a lack of qualified individuals.

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

Many reports of employees leaving for higher pay. The vaccine mandate and other COVID-related factors also cited.

- [Dental assistant] There is a lot of burnout and it's an employee market. They know if they leave, they can make a higher rate elsewhere.
- [Dental hygienist] Hygienists are leaving permanent position to become temps because of they can increase their rates in real time.
- [Dental assistant] Assistants are moving outside of the area in search of a lower cost of living.
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] I have had staff quit due to mandatory vaccination.
- [Dental hygienist] During the Pandemic, people now want to work from home or in a "safer" environment than healthcare. Also people got comfortable moving around to other jobs and careers rather than staying in one place.

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Spring 2022)

### 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.

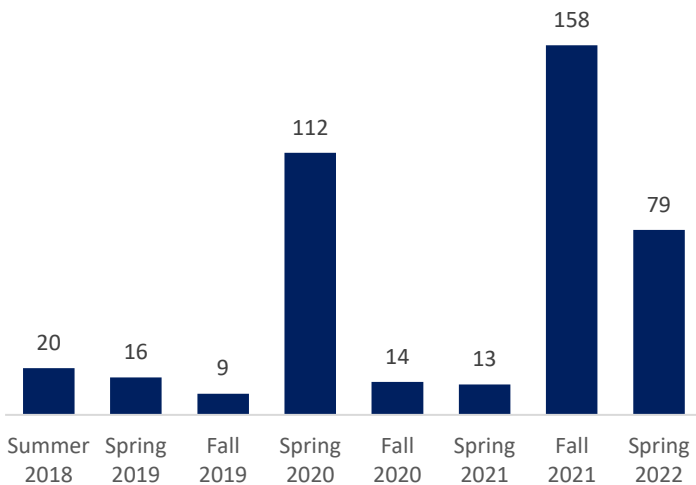
- [Dentist] Dentist now does hygiene due to lack of hygienist workforce.
- [Dental assistant] add patient coordination to tasks, making appointments, discussing treatment plans, collecting payments.
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] janitorial services, help in the back, cleaning up.
- [Expanded function dental auxiliary] our EFDA has to do assisting due to a lack of assistants.

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

Many employers are hiring less experienced workers and/or training them in-house.

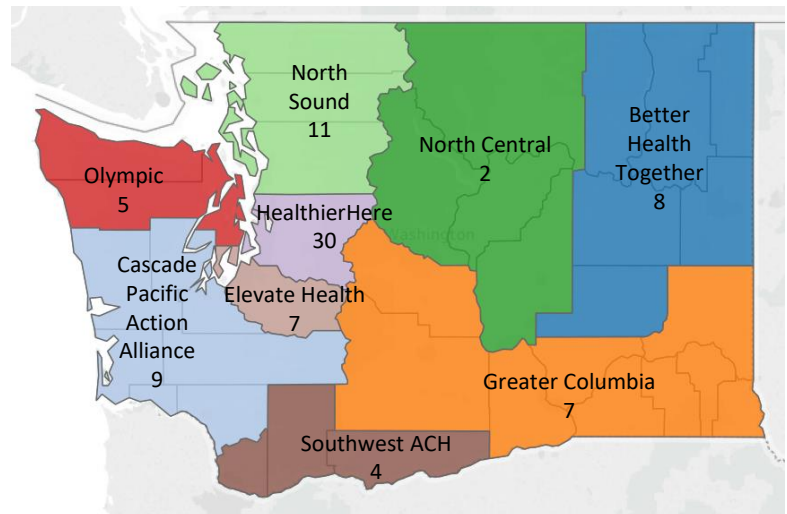
- [Dental assistant] We have elected to train new dental assistants with no prior dental assisting knowledge or education.
- [Dental assistant] [We're] hiring assistants without experience and needing to train the employee in all aspects of clinical dentistry.
- [Dental hygienist] We are motivated to hire a restorative hygienist to improve workflow and meet demands.
- [Dental assistant] We created an "assistant training manual/checklist." It seems that it may become the norm to have more turnover so we had better develop a reliable system of training.
- [Dental hygienist & assistant] [More training on the] impact of changing COVID guidelines.

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



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

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



### 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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