

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 September and October 2022. More findings from 2022 and earlier may be viewed at 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.

Overarching and Pandemic-Related Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

In the past year, has access to childcare, housing, transportation, or other factors affected staffing at your organization? Childcare was the enabling factor most frequently cited, with approximately 70% of respondents saying it affected the ability to fully staff their office/clinic. Housing, transportation and other factors were less frequently cited, but did affect staffing decisions at some offices/clinics.

| | Yes | No | % Yes | Comments |
|----------------|-----|----|-------|--|
| Childcare | 34 | 15 | 69% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big time. This is one thing if improved could help get workers back to work. • HUGE issue as most employees are single moms or have young children in need of daycare....almost opened up our own onsite daycare. • When employees' kids are sick they cannot work, I have to cancel their patients for the day. • Two hygienists resigned due to childcare issues. |
| Housing | 17 | 32 | 35% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff are priced out of our town. • I've not been able to retain staff because housing is too expensive here. • Too expensive leading to very long commutes for employees. |
| Transportation | 13 | 36 | 27% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gas is expensive • Staff unwilling to commute with increased cost. |
| Other | 10 | 39 | 20% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflation, food and fuel. • I think a lot of dental and medical personnel were made to feel a lot of fear during the pandemic and lockdowns. So they moved on to other careers. |

How have your facility's staffing arrangements affected your ability to respond to patient demand during the past year? A large majority report that staffing issues have forced them to reduce the number of appointments seen per week and have caused patient backlogs. A much smaller number report that scheduling difficulties have stabilized recently.

- I have been down a dental hygienist and a dentist for over a year. Not as many patients are being seen as I cannot handle the load myself. Patients get very frustrated...
- Have not been able to satisfy the demand for services. We have a 6-9 month waiting list for appointments.
- I have had to open an extra day (Fridays) to accommodate having to see more patients per week to keep schedules from backloging. This means I'm working approx. 45hrs a week.
- No problems dealing with patient demands.

Please describe any institutional actions your organization has taken in the past year to improve diversity in your workforce or to make your organization more representative of the population it serves. What effects have these actions had on hiring and retention of the workforce, if any?

Most respondents did not identify specific actions that have been taken in the past year to improve diversity in their workforce. Most indicated that candidate pools are limited.

- Diversity and inclusion are very important to me. Unfortunately, there are not enough qualified applicants to have the luxury of considering hiring based upon creating a diverse team.
- When [prospective employees] see people like themselves represented, they are more willing to consider your office for future employment. Hiring a diverse workforce broadens the group of people willing to work in our office.
- Primary goal was to have over 80% of our staff be bilingual. This has not affected retention.

Over the past year, has the overall behavioral health status of the workforce at your organization changed? Please describe, including resources that have been (or would be) helpful for effectively addressing behavioral health concerns.

Overall, 17 out of 46 respondents (37%) said the behavioral health status of the workforce had changed for the worse.

- Overall increase in stress and anxiety. [A] stable workforce with less change and need to pivot would help.
- Everyone is feeling the stress of the pandemic in different ways. We have become more flexible in our time off policies and expectations to help ease some of the stress.
- We do not have behavioral/mental health challenges in our workforce.

Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 2022)

Between 2016 and 2022, over the course of 13 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.

| 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 | Fall 2022 |
| 1 | Dental hygienist | Dental assistant | Dental Hygienist | Dental assistant | Dental assistant | Dental assistant | Dental hygienist | Dental hygienist |
| | | | | Dental hygienist | Dental hygienist | | | |
| 2 | Dental assistant | Dental hygienist | Dental assistant | No additional occupations reported | Dentist | Dental hygienist | Dental assistant | Dental assistant |
| 3 | Dentist | Dentist | Dentist | | Office personnel | Dentist | Office personnel | 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 | Office personnel | Dentist | 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.

- The number of vacancies far exceeds the available hygienists/assistants. Due to the high demand, their market rate exceeds what most clinics can pay. Reimbursement for their services is fixed by third party benefit carriers.
- It seems that hygienists working part time have left the field. Temps are requesting very high hourly pay which doesn't match up with insurance reimbursement.
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] Hard to find people with experience to replace directly. Can sometimes find people that can be trained, but [it] takes a large amount of time to implement.
- Not enough hygienists, assistant and front desk staff are available.
- Dental assistants are demanding more money and wanting to work less. They don't seem to care if they get fired because they know they can find another job easily.
- [Dental hygienist] Very few applicants, and those who did apply were demanding \$70/hr with no experience. More Dental Hygiene programs must be established to increase the number of hygienists working.

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

Many reports of employees leaving for higher pay, because of burnout or to work in another field.

- Hygienists are being recruited by other clinics to fill their vacancies, and offering them more wages and benefits.
- [Dental hygienist] Full time employees are leaving to work in high wage temp positions.
- Finding more dental assistants are leaving the field to pursue other forms of employment or to start a family.
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] Staff wanted to move to another area, due to cost of living in Washington State. Other staff wanted to go back to school for career advancement.
- [Dental assistant] Employees dealing with long commutes due to the high cost of living in [our area]. Childcare issues.
- [Dental assistant] Difficult job, people are choosing alternate career paths.
- [Dental hygienist] Burnout, feeling of overworked, lack of patient compliance, desire for higher wages.

Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 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.

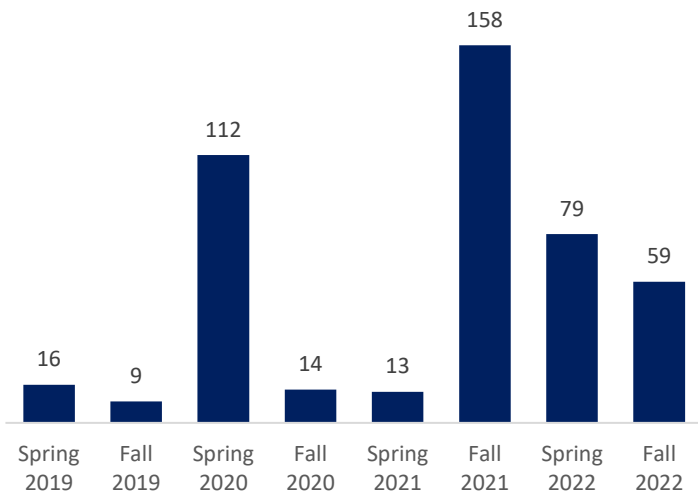
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] Cross training of front office and back clinical office EXCEPT for dental hygienist law demands a state license so no cross training possible.
- [Dental assistant] Assistant became front desk personnel.
- [Dentist] Performing cleanings and assisting.

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.

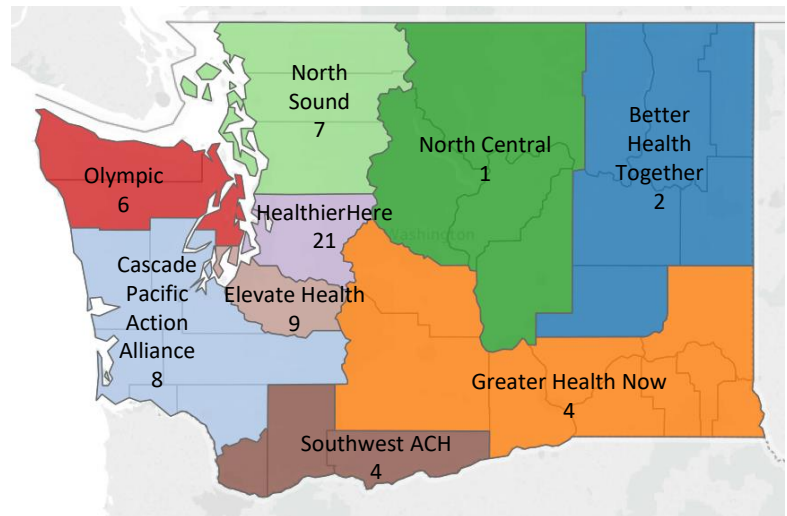
- [Dental assistant] Previously would only hire trained dental assistants -- now I will hire completely untrained persons and provide classes and training.
- [Dental assistant] There is no longer a local dental assisting school and I had to train one dental assistant that got her entire degree online!! Another has only worked a year and only did extractions. We have had to personally train both assistants from ground zero!
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] We are hiring outside of our field and retraining to become helpful in ours.
- [Office staff/Front desk staff/Scheduler] Cross training everyone on both front office duties and dental assisting.

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



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

Number of Dentist Offices and Dental Clinics Responses by Accountable Community of Health (ACH) (Fall 2022)



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.

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