

Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Findings Brief: Community Health Centers

This Findings Brief highlights current workforce needs reported to the state's Health Workforce Sentinel Network by Washington's Community Health Centers (including Federally Qualified Health Centers and Community Clinics providing care free or on a sliding fee scale) during October/November 2023. Between 2016 and 2023, over the course of 15 reporting periods, Community Health Center and other health care facilities in Washington provided key, on-the-ground information to the Washington State Health Workforce Sentinel Network. Below are highlights of trends over time and recent findings. More findings from 2023 and earlier, as well as for other health care facilities, may be viewed at <https://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings>

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies*										
Rank	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	*	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	*	*	Fall 2023
1	Medical assistant	Physician/ Surgeon		Registered nurse	Medical assistant	Registered nurse	Registered nurse			Registered nurse
						Medical assistant	Medical assistant			
2	Physician/ Surgeon	Dental assistant		Mental health counselor	Registered nurse	Physician/ Surgeon	Physician/ Surgeon			Physician/ Surgeon
	Dental assistant	Medical assistant			Physician/ Surgeon	Mental health counselor				
	Registered nurse	Nurse practitioner								
3	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor		Physician/ Surgeon		Dental assistant	Dental assistant			Medical assistant
		Physician Assistant				Dental hygienist	Office staff / front desk / scheduler			
						Nurse practitioner				
4	Substance use disorder professional	Dentist		Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Substance use disorder professional	Dental hygienist			Dental assistant
	Nurse practitioner					Mental health counselor				
	Dental hygienist					Nurse practitioner				
5	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency				Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Psychologist, clinical and counseling			Dentist

↑ Most cited

*Note: Includes Federally Qualified Health Centers and Community Clinics providing care free or on a sliding fee scale. Occupations cited by the same number of responses share the same rank number. Findings prior to Fall 2017 not shown due to space constraints and may be seen at www.sentinelnetwork.org. Spring 2020, Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 findings not shown due to low response.

Reasons for exceptionally long vacancies reported by Community Health Centers

Themes: Too few applicants and wage competition were frequently cited. More in-house training programs mentioned, with mixed success.

- [Registered nurse] Several candidates have stated our pay was too low. Not enough candidates in the applicant pool, local and specialty clinic competition.
- [Medical assistant] MAs are scarce as applicants. We instituted an in-house training program and are having a hard time hiring and retaining MAs.

Community Health Centers (Fall 2023)

Highlights of current workforce needs reported to the state's Health Workforce Sentinel Network by Washington's Community Health Centers (including Federally Qualified Health Centers and Community Clinics providing care free or on a sliding fee scale) during October/November 2023 (continued).

Reasons for exceptionally long vacancies reported by Community Health Centers (cont.)

- *[Physician/surgeon] ...increasing demand for primary care, driven by a growing and aging populations. Incentivizing medical students and residents to choose Family medicine through scholarships or loan forgiveness program can attract more professionals to the field.*

Reasons for worker retention/turnover problems reported by Community Health Centers

Wage competition frequently cited as contributing to turnover.

- *[Registered nurse] Nurses moving to Metropolitan areas, recruited by hospitals, childcare is an issue for new moms*
- *[Dental assistant] Low wages, dental assistants often earn wages close to the minimum wage. One critical solution would be to raise the wages for dental assistants to a level that better reflects the value of their work. Offering competitive compensation can enhance their job satisfaction and reduce the incentive to seek higher-paying positions*

Changes in Community Health Centers' priorities regarding orientation/onboarding for new employees and training for existing/incumbent worker

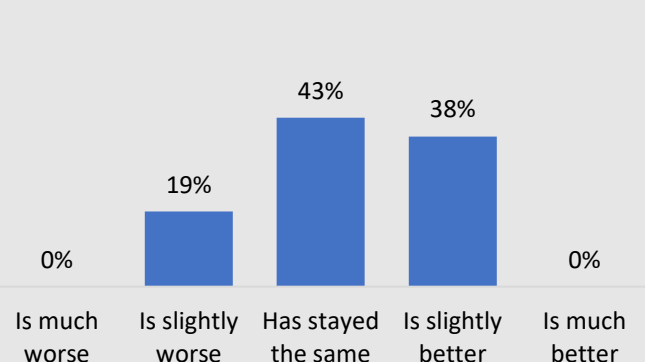
Many mentions of specific changes in training aimed at enhancing skills and retaining staff.

- *[Dental assistant] Now doing a formal [dental assistant] training program...*
- *[Community health worker] ...a lot of trainings needed in their role, development of competency skills checklist.*
- *[Medical assistant] We've implemented robust skills checks for this particular employee group. This has enabled us to standardize some processes and ensure that additional training is provided to those in need.*
- *[Nursing assistant] Longer training time, as well as cross training in a variety of specialties.*
- *[Multiple occupations] We are revamping our orientation and onboarding and exit processes...*
- *For all ..., we have increased our orientation to include Mental Health First Aid, Trauma Informed Care, and JEDI training.*
- *Specific program training in supporting families, training on overdose awareness and use of Naloxone.*

Overarching and Pandemic-Related Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

Responses by Community Health Centers to questions about current overarching workforce issues are summarized below. Earlier overarching and pandemic-related findings are at www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19/.

In the past six months, how has your organization's ability to staff your facility/facilities changed?



- *[Slightly worse] ...we have to do constant training and hiring and just when you get someone in and competent either they leave or someone else leaves so there is constant turnover and an inability to "catch up" in the work.*
- *[Stayed the same] Dentists have been worse, RN's have always been challenging, DA's have always been challenging, Medical Assistants better now than probably a year ago, Pharmacists very easy to recruit, harder to find Bilingual staff.*
- *[Slightly better] Ongoing issues filling open positions however seems like retention is improving.*

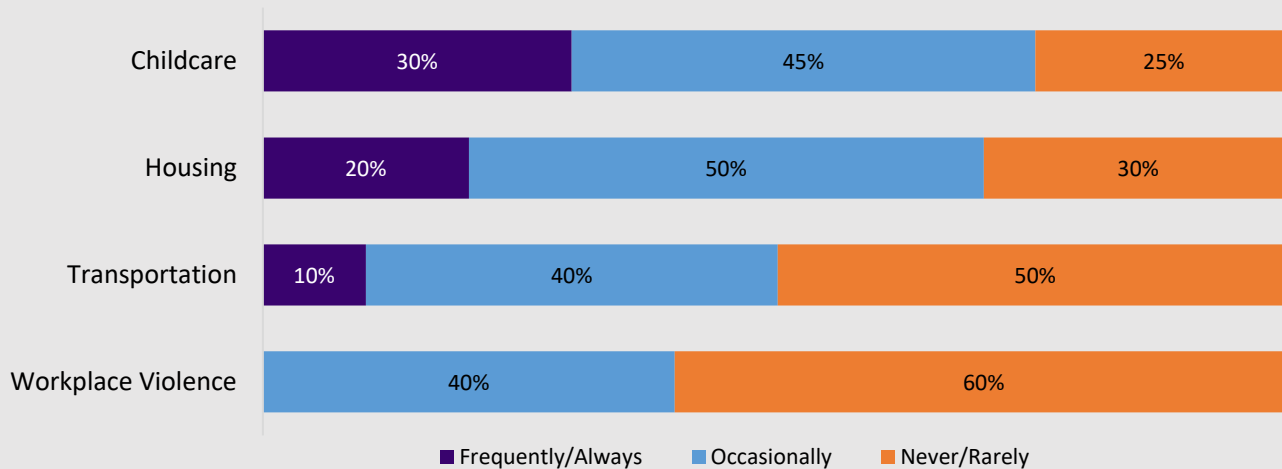
Community Health Centers (Fall 2023)

Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples (continued)

How has staffing affected your facility's ability to respond to patient demand during the past year?

	%	Comment examples
Delay in care for current patients/clients	45%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Provider vacancies lead to decreased number of appointments available.</i> • <i>We have waits of 2-6 weeks for routine visits in medical</i> • <i>We are often the only practice in the [area] accepting new adults (Medicaid and uninsured), [causing] access issues for our established patients.</i>
Inability to take new patients/clients	20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Long wait lists due to staffing shortages.</i>
Reduction in the number of patients/clients you are able to care for	10%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Our workforce shortage has affected the time it takes to coordinate care for pt.'s, the rate at which we accept new referrals / tasks and the pace at which we could normally assist them.</i>
No effect, operations continue as usual	25%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>We are a brand new primary care clinic. Currently we have enough staff to provide care for all the patients we have. In fact, we are actively seeking new patients and are wanting to expand our patient population.</i>

To what extent have the following (childcare, housing, transportation, workplace violence) affected your ability to recruit and retain staff in the past year? What strategies has your organization used to address these challenges?



Comment examples

- *Finding resources for childcare for staff, flexibility with schedules.*
- *Many employees have access to childcare services provided by the ... tribe.*
- *We offer a contribution to a dependent care flexible spending account for those who have dependents who utilize childcare facilities. We are also looking at different options we can help support to increase childcare workforce and/or facilities within our service area.*
- *Purchasing leases for housing whether they are needed or not to keep on hand.*
- *We started giving employees a monthly commuting stipend.*
- *[Workplace violence] Ongoing staff training in de-escalation, trauma, harm reduction.*
- *[Workplace violence] Implementing employee safety systems*

Community Health Centers (Fall 2023)

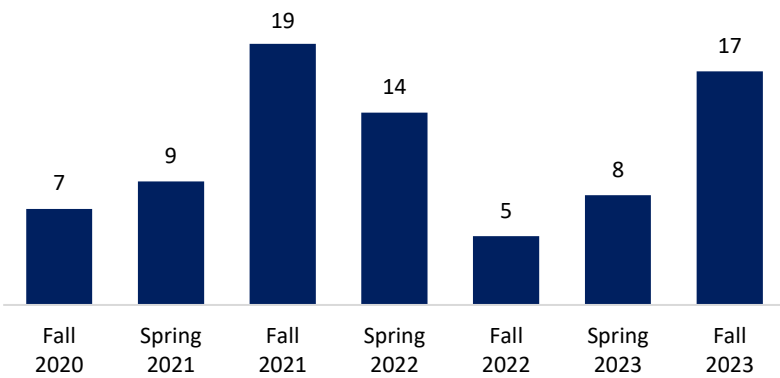
Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples (continued)

Is your organization assisting workers who are pursuing education or training with the goal of advancing to a higher paying healthcare career? If yes, in what ways is your organization supporting these activities?

Themes: Many different education and training programs were described by Community Health Centers that were being offered to a range of staff

- We offer on the job training (apprenticeship)
- We have 29 learning programs ... including 4 fully-paid on-the-job training programs. Our MA-Registered program has graduated 4 learners who went on to medical school, PA school and nursing school.
- Partnering with schools and starting dental track in training program we are launching in [our county].
- Tuition assistance, education assistance and internships.
- [We have] a stipend that is offered yearly to all employee wishing to pursue higher education. We will also modify employee work hours to allow time for education.
- We have tuition reimbursement for those looking to obtain an RN, BSN, or MSN degree.
- Apprenticeship, ARNP Fellowship program, tuition reimbursement, reduction of scheduled hours to P/T for staff to go to school.
- ...We also provide a leadership development series that is modified year over year, and are piloting an emerging leader program early next year. We also provide all staff with 1.5 hours monthly of time dedicated to training based on their department/function.

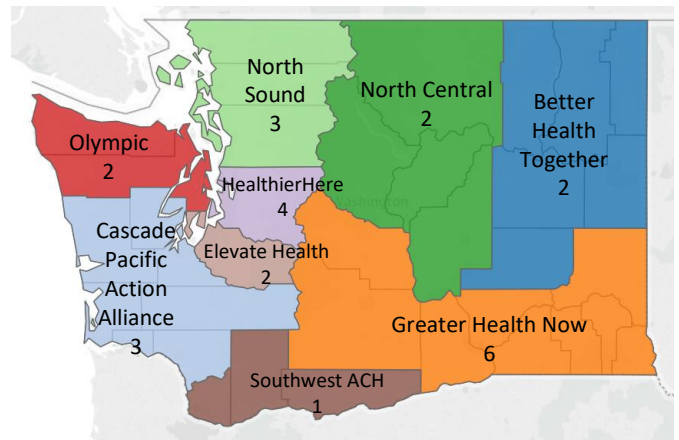
Number of Sentinel Network Responses from Community Health Centers* in WA by Data Collection Date**



*Federally Qualified Health Centers and Community Clinics providing care free or on a sliding fee scale.

** Responses prior to Fall 2020 not shown due to space constraints.

Number of Community Health Centers* Responses by Accountable Community of Health (ACH) (Fall 2023)



Note: Each facility may serve clients/patients in more than one county, which is why map totals may exceed total unique responses.

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. The Sentinel Network is an initiative of Washington’s Health Workforce Council, conducted collaboratively by Washington’s Workforce Board and the University of Washington Center for Health Workforce Studies (UW CHWS). Initial Sentinel Network funding 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 organization’s workforce needs to inform policy and planning responses.
- 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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