

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

This Findings Brief highlights current workforce needs reported to the state's Health Workforce Sentinel Network by Washington's dentist offices/dental clinics during October/November 2023. Between 2016 and 2023, over the course of 15 reporting periods, dentist offices/dental clinics 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	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023
1	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant
	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist					
2	No additional occupations reported	Dentist	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist
3		Office personnel	Dentist	Office personnel	Office personnel	Office personnel	Dentist
		Medicaid navigator					
4		No additional occupations reported	Office personnel	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist	Multiple occupations at the same frequency

← Most cited

\*Findings prior to Fall 2020 not shown due to space constraints. Occupations cited by the same number of responses share the same rank number.

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

Respondents reported not enough applicants for open positions, issues around salary, wages, and benefits, and other recruitment and retention issues as the main reasons for exceptionally long vacancies.

- [Office personnel] Very limited experience, have to train "in house."
- [Dental assistant] Not enough qualified dental assistants available in western Washington in general. Very high wage expectations have become commonplace causing constant movement of workers from office to office
- [Dental hygienist] Shortage of trained providers. Lower pay that is not enticing candidates even though there are good benefits
- [Dentist] Stagnant dental benefit and insurance company reimbursements of fees do not allow for cost of living increases commensurate with rate of inflation.
- [Dental assistant] Existing employees helped with the training of new employees and were paid for training the new employees. They were not required to do assisting on those days.

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 2023)

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

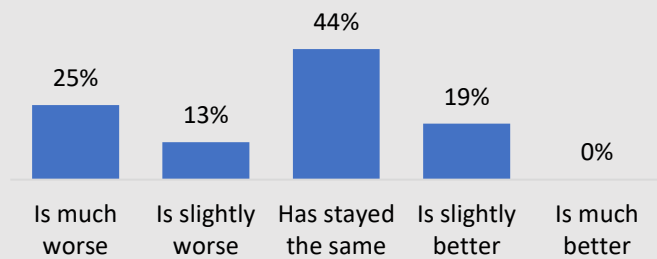
#### Comment examples

- *[Dental hygienist and dental assistant] We had a more detailed on boarding protocol that we designed. We also had the employee come in for a full day for training not seeing patients, so they have time to ask questions and not feel stress of having to perform that job while they were being trained.*
- *[Dental assistant] Existing employees helped with the training of new employees and were paid for training the new employees. They were not required to do assisting on those days.*

### Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

Responses by dentist offices/dental clinics 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/](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19/).

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



- *[Much worse] It puts more stress on the staff that is employed, such as dentists doing hygiene appointments to keep up with care demands, leaving less room for patients who need restorative or emergency treatment.*
- *[Has stayed the same] It remains difficult to find/recruit employees.[...] We would love to hire highly qualified applicants, but their pay demand is too high for our available resources.*
- *[Slightly better] Dental assistant positions were filled, but hygienist needs are still unmet*

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

Responses from dental offices and clinics highlighted existing and ongoing staffing challenges and indicated that this impacts the ability to provide care primarily through reducing the volume of patients and delays in care.

	%	Comments
Delay in care for current patients/clients	29%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The bottleneck of reduced availability due to inadequate hygienist hours and less efficient dental assistants reduced our ability to provide care at the same pace that we used to which has resulted in delays</i></li> </ul>
Reduction in the number of patients/clients you are able to care for	53%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We can't keep up with demand. Hygiene schedules used to be booked out six weeks, now it's 8-9 months</i></li> <li>• <i>Increased stress/load on fewer existing staff. This increases the encouragement of looking for alternate employment in alternate non-healthcare fields.</i></li> </ul>
No effect, operations continue as usual	18%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We have had no trouble staffing our clinic</i></li> </ul>

#### 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?

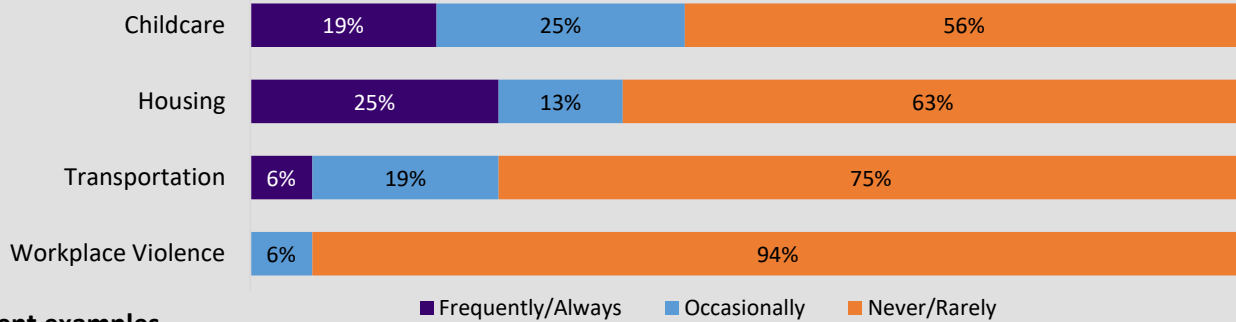
29% of respondents answered “yes” to this question. Of those who answered “yes,” respondents indicated that they offer provide flexible scheduling, externships, and in-house or internal training pathways.

- *Have dental assistants working on BS or applying to dental school. We accommodate the schedule when necessary and provide more training were applicable.*
- *We currently have 3 students who are externing here.*

## Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics (Fall 2023)

### Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples (continued)

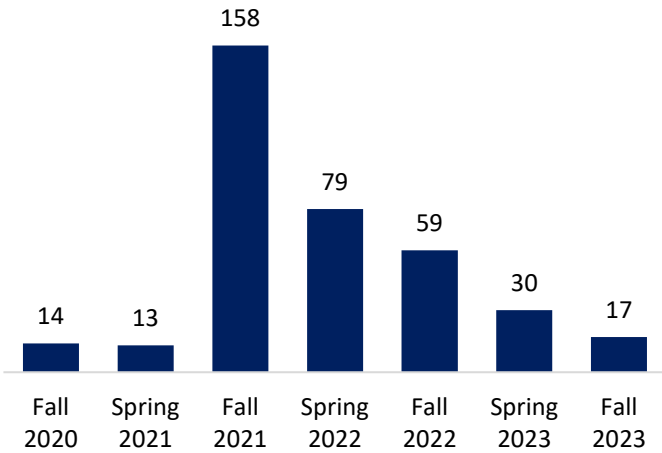
**To what extent have childcare, housing, transportation, and/or workplace violence affected your ability to recruit and retain staff in the past year? What strategies has your organization used to address these challenges?**



#### Comment examples

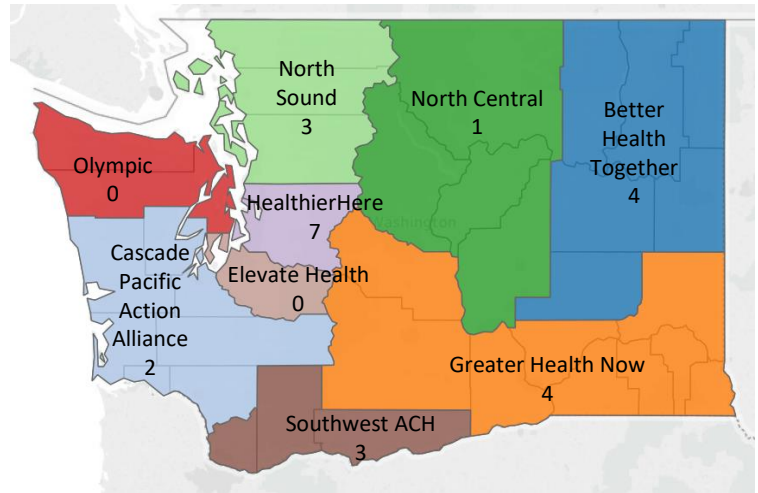
- *As a small business, we can support but unable to provide these services.*
- *Strategies have failed: Increasing wages, Increasing benefits etc.*
- *None of these have really affected our ability to recruit and retain staff.*
- *Rarely, but if an employees car breaks down, we simply absorb the duties caused by their absence.*
- *These are challenges we cannot address.*

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



\*Findings prior to Fall 2020 not shown due to space constraints.

**Number of Dentist Offices/Dental Clinics 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. 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 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](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org).

Contact: [healthworkforce@wasentinelnetwork.org](mailto:healthworkforce@wasentinelnetwork.org)

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