

# Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network

## Findings Brief: Demand for Nursing Occupations

Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network links the state's healthcare industry with partners in education and training, policy, and planning to identify and respond to emerging demand changes in the health workforce. Every six months, employers ("Sentinels") from across the state and from a wide range of healthcare sectors share their top workforce challenges. This report highlights findings regarding demand for **nursing occupations (advanced registered nurse practitioners, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and nursing assistants-certified)** as of Fall, 2023 in select settings that rely heavily on the nursing workforce. More in-depth findings from 2023 and prior years may be viewed at [www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings](http://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings).

### Employer Perspectives: Statewide Nursing Workforce Demand

In Fall 2023, nursing occupations were among the top 3 occupations with exceptionally long vacancies as reported by:

- Assisted living facilities
- Nursing homes or skilled nursing facilities
- FQHCs or community clinics
- Primary care medical clinics
- Rural health clinics
- Hospitals
- Schools (K – 12)
- Higher education or research organizations
- Public health organizations

### Nursing Workforce Demand at Specific Facility Types: Small Hospitals (< 25 beds)

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies at small hospitals (< 25 beds)							
Rank	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023
1	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse
2	Medical assistant	Nursing assistant	Medical assistant	Nursing assistant	Cook / Food services	Medical / Clinical lab technologist	Environmental Services
	Nursing assistant		Nursing assistant				
3	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Medical assistant	Physician / Surgeon	Cook / Food services	Nursing assistant	Medical / Clinical lab technician	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency including Nursing assistant
		Medical / Clinical lab technologist				Nursing assistant	

← 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.

### RNs and nursing assistants have been cited among the top 3 occupations with exceptionally long vacancies by Small Hospitals over time. Common examples of reasons for these vacancies cited in 2023 include:

- *It has been difficult to recruit RNs and CNAs to our small rural community. Although we are competitive with wages, it is difficult to provide the comprehensive medical benefits packages of other health systems.*
- [Registered nurse] *We are in a very rural location without many amenities. Housing and childcare are big issues for recruiting and retaining RNs.*
- [Nursing assistant] *Rural area with difficulty in recruiting, lack of educational opportunities for community members to train in this field.*

## Demand for Nursing Occupations (Fall 2023)

### Nursing Workforce Demand at Specific Facility Types: Skilled Nursing Facilities / Nursing Homes

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies: Skilled Nursing Facilities/Nursing Homes							
Rank	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023
1	Nursing assistant	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Nursing assistant	Registered nurse	Registered nurse
2	Registered nurse	Nursing assistant	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse
			Nursing assistant		Registered nurse	Nursing assistant	
3	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse	Occupational therapist	Nursing assistant	Cook / Food services	Cook / Food services	Nursing assistant
			Physical therapist				
4	Occupational therapy assistant	Occupational therapist	Speech-language therapist	Cook / Food services	Dietitian / Nutritionist	Environmental Services	Occupational therapist
	Physical therapist	Physical therapist				Occupational therapy assistant	Physical therapist
	Physical therapy assistant	Social worker					
		Speech-language therapist					

← 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.

### Nursing occupations have been cited most frequently as occupations with exceptionally long vacancies by Skilled Nursing Facilities/Nursing Homes over time. Common examples of reasons for these vacancies cited in 2023 include:

- [Nursing assistant] *There hasn't been enough certified nursing assistants searching for jobs, so we have had to sponsor quite a few applicants to take a nursing assistant training course to have certified nursing assistant.*
- [Licensed practical nurse] *No LPN program in the area. There are not enough qualified candidates. We are...unable to compete with agencies and hospitals.*
- [Registered nurse] *Not enough applicants and we are unable to have competitive wages.*

### Turnover due to competition with staffing agencies and other healthcare sectors as well as burnout and retirements has also been an issue:

- [Licensed practical nurse] *Nurses are able to find jobs in various sectors of healthcare and skilled nursing can be a challenge for some who would prefer to be in a much more laid back setting.*
- [Licensed practical nurse] *Turnover due to leaving for [staffing] agency or seeking remote positions.*
- [Registered nurse] *There has been wage wars going on between every place that employs a RN and sometimes we cannot come close to the wages. Staffing agencies and the Hospital are the two biggest competitors...*

### Due to recruitment and retention difficulties, employers at SNFs/nursing homes report that they often have to shift responsibilities and use their nursing staff in new roles:

- [Registered nurse] *Nurses in administrative roles have had to take floor/medication cart positions to cover the shortages related to the pandemic.*
- [Nursing assistants are working as] *office assistants, admissions and also medical records.*
- [Registered nurses and licensed practical nurses] *... are working as NACs as well.*
- [Registered nurse] *Management nurses have become floor nurses and CNAs and RNs have become CNAs.*

## Demand for Nursing Occupations (Fall 2023)

### Nursing Workforce Demand at: Community Health Clinics (including FQHCs), Primary Care Clinics, and Rural Health Clinics

Employers from ambulatory care clinics have reported difficulty hiring and retaining nurses over the past several years. Responses from 2023 indicate that these clinics often compete with other healthcare sectors and cannot match wages for nurses. Work schedules, less competitive benefits packages and specific skill requirements were also reported as barriers.

- [Community health clinic, Registered nurse] *Several candidates have stated our pay was too low.*
- [Rural health clinic, Licensed practical nurse] *We cannot compete with hospitals who are offering \$30,000 sign-on bonuses and salaries that pay LPNs typically \$15-20 more per hour than outpatient clinic nursing. We are looking for LPNs who instead value our culture and align with our Mission more than they want the higher pay.*
- [Rural health clinic, Registered Nurse] *We have lost 7 RN's since April 2023: 4 went to hospitals for higher pay, and 3 went to the school districts who are offering 9 am-2 pm hours, summers off, and higher wages and benefits.*
- [Primary care clinic, Licensed practical nurse] *LPN's have a better schedule and more pay working at our local hospital. Most hospital nurses are used to working 3 days a week and they do not want to switch to a 5 day work week.*
- [Community health clinic, Nursing assistant] *Too few professionals for available positions and compensation is often more competitive than we can match.*
- [Community health clinic, Licensed practical nurse] *No local applicants - most come from more populated areas and are not experienced in rural care.*

### Themes from Employers Across Multiple Facility Types Regarding Nursing Occupations

#### Nurse Staffing Agencies (“Contract” or “Travel” Nursing)

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers relied on staffing agencies to fill nursing workforce needs. However, pay rates for contract nurses were high, which stretched budgets and caused many nurses to leave full-time positions. During 2023, reliance on staffing agencies has diminished, but some sectors – especially long-term care facilities – still report use of contract nurses and competition with staffing agencies for nurse hires.

- [Skilled nursing facility/Nursing home] *The explosion of Staffing Agencies for RN's and LPN's, has created an artificial shortage. The cultural change is creating a "Have License will Travel" work pool. But an interesting side note is that some of those Agency nurses do like to work at the same location because the agency will pay them more.*
- [Skilled nursing facility/Nursing home] *Nurses no longer want to work for corporations rather agency which pays significantly more, causing even further strain on nursing facilities.*
- [Skilled nursing facility/Nursing home] *It seems like as soon as we fill the spot, one of our other nurses gets hired away somewhere else, moves, or retires. There is always something, so we have continued to have to rely on agency nurses to fill our open shifts.*
- [Small hospital] *Burnout / high traveler wages. Staff can make more money as a traveler than employed. We are creating a NAC training program in-house.*

### Themes from Employers Regarding Nursing Occupations (Cont)

#### Nurse educators and nursing faculty

Many employers suggest that increasing the number of nursing graduates would relieve some of their hiring difficulties. One barrier reported by nurse education programs is hiring enough nursing faculty to expand programs. Nursing faculty must be highly qualified but salaries at educational institutions are often lower than in other settings.

- *[We are] Unable to hire enough Nurse Educators to teach in our full time program. Adjunct faculty can be found, but is also limited. We did make a full cohort of students this quarter, but it required current faculty/administration [support].*
- *There are not enough master's prepared nurses. We do not have enough interest from personnel wanting to be nurse educators. People still feel salaries are too low to leave bedside.*
- *In general, we have a difficult time recruiting full-time nursing program faculty. We believe there are many reasons for this, in particular the level of education required to teach is such that we are openly competing with graduate level nursing fields, like nurse practitioner, that pay significantly more salary. Additionally, the broader nursing shortage has caused a bottleneck.*
- *Nursing Professors who have a Master's degree make less than a K-12 teacher. They make significantly less than a practicing RN.*

#### 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).

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