Washington's Health Workforce SENTINEL NETWORK

Findings Brief: *Dental Offices/Clinics*

Spring 2025

This brief highlights workforce needs reported by Washington's **dental offices and clinics** to the Health Workforce Sentinel Network in **May/June 2025.** These facilities have contributed workforce insights since 2016, across 17 reporting periods. More findings are available at wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings.

Dentist Offices/Clinics

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies*

Rank	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023	Spring 2024	Spring 2025
1	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist
2	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental assistant
3	Dentist	Office personnel	Office personnel	Office personnel	Dentist	Dentist	Office personnel
4	Office personnel	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist	Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency	Office personnel	Dentist

← Most cited

Findings prior to Fall 2021 not shown due to space constraints. Occupations cited by the same number of responses share the same rank number.

Reasons for Exceptionally Long Vacancies

Respondents highlighted the need for more dental hygienists and that there aren't enough recent graduates to meet demand. For dental assistants, respondents noted that while they can be hired, they often need additional on-the-job training to be successful in their roles. Examples include:

- *[Dental hygienist] I have been trying to find a full-time hygienist for my office in [my city] for the past 2 years now. Unable to find anyone who can fulfill this position. Would help if we can get foreign trained dentists to cover the huge demand for hygienists.*
- *[Dental hygienist] Severe hygiene shortage due to lack of Dental Hygiene School and very short average career for hygienists (7 years). Many hygienists work part time with reduced hours. Solutions include opening more hygiene schools, allowing expanded scope for current dental assistants […]*
- *[Dental assistant] […] this was once considered an entry level position that an office could hire and train until the assistant had a skillset that could be compensated fairly. With rising wages outside of dentistry, this entry level is now on par with the same hourly rate as jobs requiring no skill at all to begin.*
- *[Dental assistant] Very difficult to find well trained assistants due to many students being lured by for profit schools . These schools under train their students and charge thousands for the certificate.*

Reasons for retention/turnover problems

Similarly, respondents highlighted not enough qualified applicants as a common reason for retention/turnover problems. Others cited rising wages and wage competition between dental assisting and office personnel seeking jobs outside of the dental field and cost of living, transportation, and housing as reasons for retention/turnover problems. Examples include:

- *[Dental assistant] lack of experienced applicants so try OTJ training, and the employee discovers dentistry isn't what they thought/wanted so back to the drawing board of finding someone else. Childcare options and costs in the area also play a pivotal role in applicant availability for 8-5/6 working schedule.*
- *[Dental hygienist] Hygienist move to other practices that pay more then their current one. This increases the cost of preventive dental care for the public. Increasing number of hygienists will decrease the number of practice hopping hygienists. Supply and demand.*
- *[Dental assistant] Little education is needed so many use it to advance their career. We have taught employees with little to no experience.*

Dental Workforce Recruitment and Retention Strategies

In the past year, what strategies has your dental office/organization used to recruit and retain your workforce and how effective have these strategies been in achieving your recruitment and retention goals?

Strategy	Percent of respondents
Changes to wages	96.8%
Changes to benefits	58.7%
Changes to schedules or work hours	60.3%
Updating dental equipment/tools	46.0%
Modification of workflow and/or staffing configuration	39.7%
Improvements to workplace ergonomics to minimize repetitive stress injuries	25.4%
Other strategies	7.9%

- *"It has worked for retention but not for the long-term viability of the business."*
- *"More ergonomic tools and equipment. Have to do accelerated hygiene due to lack of hygienist. New software to help front desks."*

In the past year, what resources have you used to recruit new employees and how effective have these resources been in helping you recruit new employees?

Strategy	Percent of respondents
Word of mouth or networks of existing staff members	84.4%
Recruiting services or agencies	59.4%
Message Boards	53.1%
In-office training for advancement of administrative or assistant staff	25.0%
Connections with post-secondary education	25.0%
Job Fairs	23.4%
Apprenticeships	14.1%
Other	9.4%
Connections with K-12 schools	7.8%

- *Very effective. Our employee referral program nets a large number of referring employees. Our dental residency program has resulted in 25% of graduates that are taking positions with us.*
- *I think the message boards, word of mouth, and in-house training for advancement has been helpful with recruiting for our dental assistants and administrative/office staff. I think job fairs were not super helpful, but got the word out to high school aged students about more entry level positions and alternatives to going to college with our on-the-job training programs. I think connection with post-secondary education has been helpful in recruiting higher level staff, like Dentists and Dental Hygienists.*

Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

Currently, what are your organization's top workforce issues?
Two-thirds of respondents representing dental offices and clinics said **recruiting new workers/filling vacancies** and a third of respondents said **retaining current workers/increasing worker satisfaction.** Respondents from both rural and urban settings reported difficulties recruiting new workers and filling vacancies.

- Rural: *"We have been advertising for a dental hygienist for over a year. We have not received any applications and when we try to recruit from the dental hygiene school an hour away DSOs are sweeping in or they are not willing to move to our area."*
- Rural: *"I own a private dental practice. All professional industries are finding it difficult to get professionals to move to [our area]. The local community health dental clinics and DSO offices offer their associate dentists more by way of salary and benefits than a private practice dental office can afford."*

In the past year, has your organization supported "grow-your-own" programs (i.e., apprenticeships, residencies or on-the-job training opportunities) to train workers for specific roles?
Roughly half of respondents supported "grow-your-own" programs, with a higher proportion of rural respondents supporting these programs.

- Urban: *"Both front office and dental assistant positions can be trained with no prior experience in a dental office."*
- Rural: *"We have trained or attempted to train several dental assistants."*

Some who have not yet supported "grow-your-own" programs, would consider exploring these kinds of programs.

- Urban: *"The only way for an assistant to become a hygienist is to go back to school and leave the workforce. The only way a hygienist can become a dentist is to go back to school and leave the workforce. However, an apprenticeship model for this would likely result in poorly trained dentists and hygienists."*

To what extent have the following affected your ability to recruit and retain your workforce in the past year?
Childcare and housing remain top issues for employers across urban and rural geographies, impacting their recruitment and retention efforts.

Childcare availability

- Rural/urban combination: *"affordable childcare for employees continues to be an issue. We should have childcare incentives for employees who work in health care."*
- Rural: *"Childcare hours and cost are a barrier for many full time employees."*

Housing availability

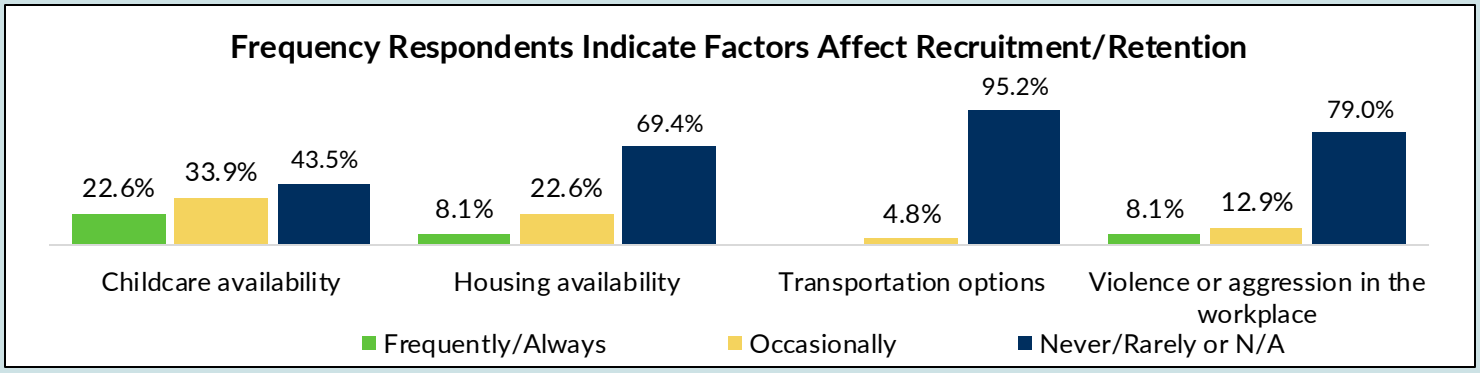
- Urban: *"This goes along with transportation- there are minimal affordable options, so then people live further away, making the commute longer."*
- Rural: *"Lack of quality housing in the city or in the county"*

Transportation options were an occasional concern for mostly urban dental offices/clinics.

- Urban: *"limited bus routes to the office in the event someone doesn't have a car."*

Violence or aggression in the workplace did not appear to be a concern for dental offices/clinics, generally.

- Rural/urban combination: *"We serve a complex community and promote trauma informed care. We provide training for all employees in this area."*

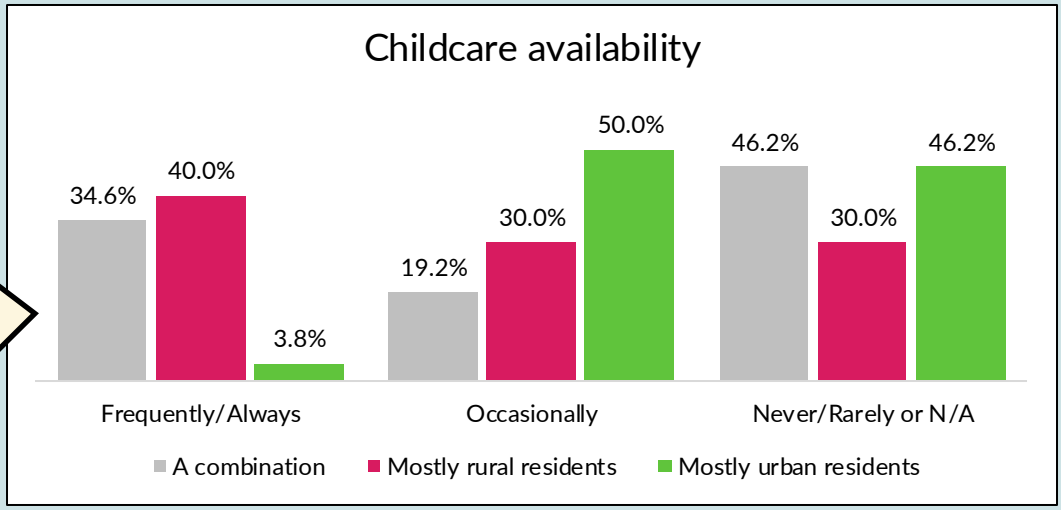


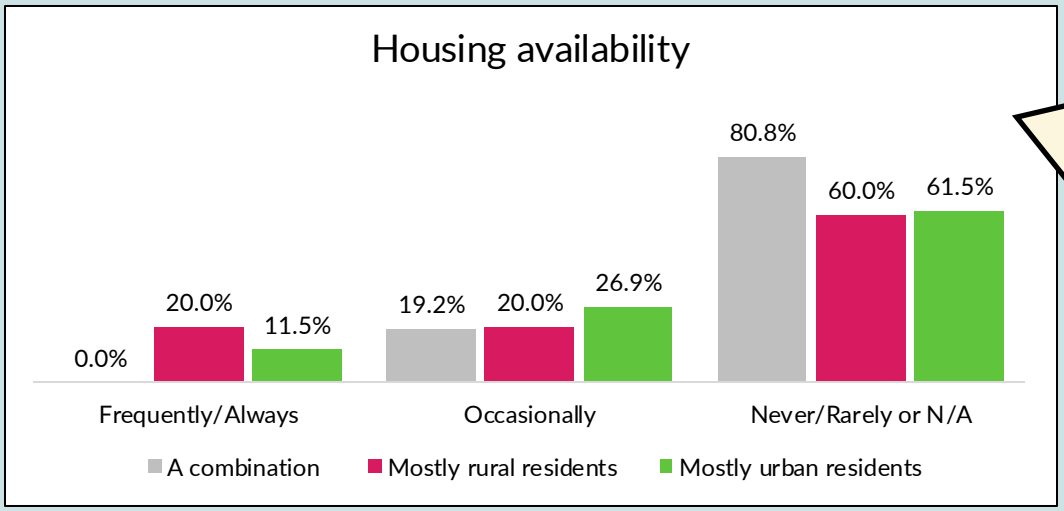
Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples (continued)

To what extent have the following affected your ability to recruit and retain your workforce in the past year? (continued)

Differences between dental offices and clinics that serve rural or urban populations, or a combination of both, emerge when it comes to childcare availability, housing availability, and violence or aggression in the workplace.

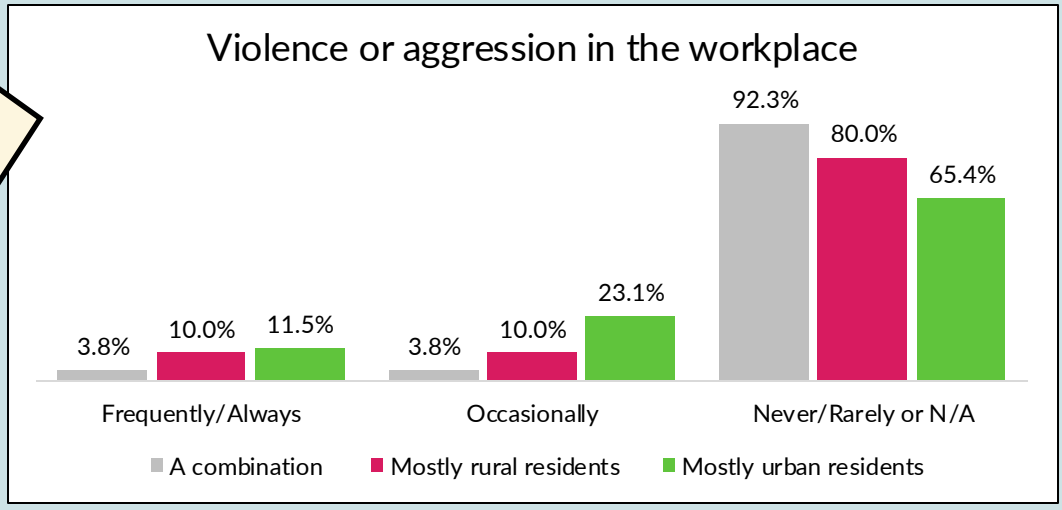
Dental offices and clinics primarily serving rural or a combination of rural and urban patients had a higher proportion of respondents who said that childcare availability **frequently/always** impacted their ability to recruit or retain staff in the past year.



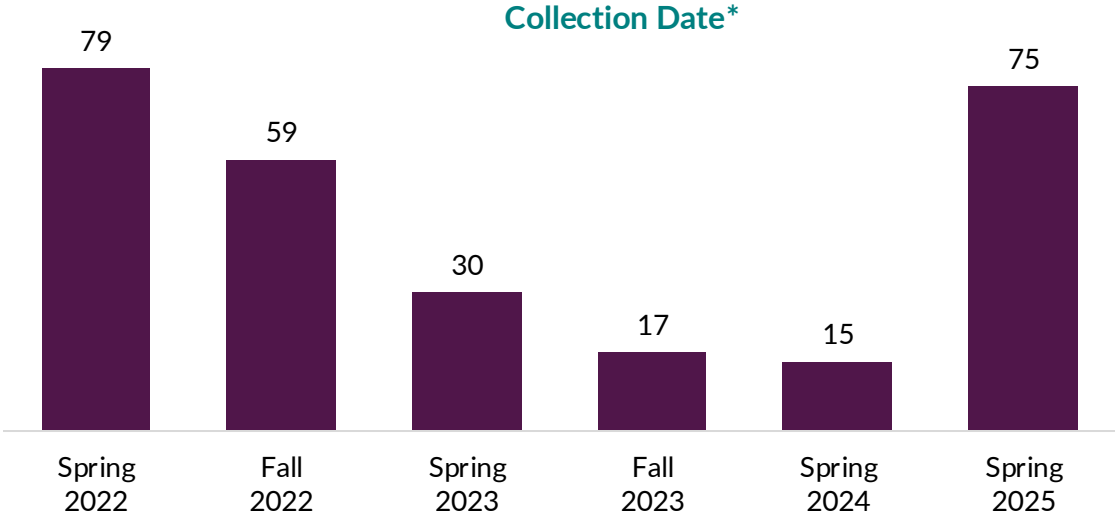


Dental offices and clinics serving patients across urban and rural areas experienced **occasional** challenges related to housing availability and affordability, but this percentage was slightly higher in urban areas.

Most respondents serving rural or a combination of rural and urban patients indicated that they **never/rarely** experience challenges related to violence or aggression in the workplace. Offices and clinics serving mostly urban residents had a slightly higher proportion of respondents indicate that violence or aggression were **occasional** problems.

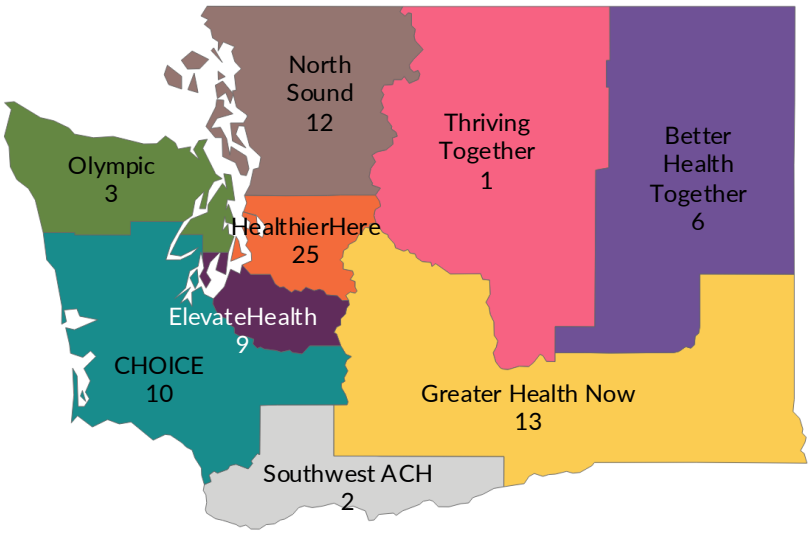


Number of Responses from Dental Offices/Clinics in WA by Data Collection Date*



*Findings prior to Spring 2022 not shown due to space constraints.

Number of Responding Dental Offices/Clinics by Accountable Community of Health (ACH), Spring 2025



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, with a focus is 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 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:
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