Washington's Health Workforce SENTINEL NETWORK

Findings Brief: *Rural Health Workforce*

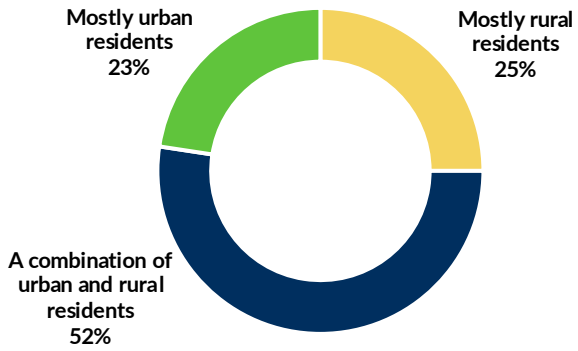
Spring 2025

This brief highlights findings regarding workforce challenges and successes specific to **rural-serving healthcare organizations** as of Spring 2025. 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. Employers ("Sentinels") from across the state and from a wide range of healthcare sectors share their top workforce challenges. More findings are available at wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings.

Rural Participation in the Sentinel Network , Spring 2025

The Sentinel Network questionnaire asks respondents to report the rural/urban composition of their service area. In Spring 2025, twenty-five percent of responding facilities indicated that they served mostly rural residents of Washington. Unless otherwise indicated, this report highlights responses from facilities that serve mostly rural residents.

"In general, does your facility provide services to:"*

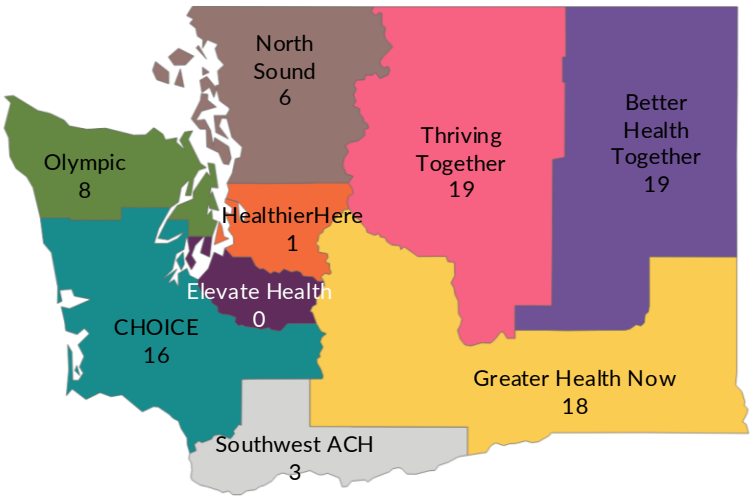


**Percentages are out of all Sentinel Network responses from Spring 2025*

Facility types with the highest percentage of Sentinel Network respondents reporting that they serve mostly rural residents (MRR) in Spring 2025:

- Rural health clinics – 80% of respondents serve MRR
- Small hospitals (< 25 beds) – 80% of respondents serve MRR
- Medical/diagnostic laboratory – 50% of respondents serve MRR

Rural Responses by Accountable Community of Health (ACH), Spring 2025



Workforce Themes Identified by Facilities Serving Rural Residents

Employers from facilities that serve mostly rural residents identified several workforce topics that are particularly challenging in a rural setting:

- Many rural employers report that they have created their own training programs because many of the education and training programs for healthcare workers are not located in rural areas
- Attracting workers to rural areas to stay long-term is something that many employers struggle with. Many use temporary or travel contract workers to fill needed gaps but recognize that this isn't a long-term solution.

Many education opportunities are not located in rural areas

Many employers serving rural populations say that there are limited local training and education opportunities

- *Local [community college] stopped MA-C [medical assistant – certified] program - we have developed an MAR [medical assistant – registered] program which has helped but has created other obstacles. (Rural health clinic)*
- *Washington requires Medical Assistants to be certified, and there is a shortage of CMA programs in the area. (Small hospital)*
- *No real local training schools [for dental hygienists] in nearby counties. (Dentist office/dental clinic)*

Some rural-serving employers have developed their own training programs or partnered with educational institutions, but the resources required for these programs can create difficulties

- *We do participate in a Medical Assistant Apprenticeship (which we love) and it helps us to grow our own, but it takes a long time & in the meantime we have remained short-staffed in this area for 2 years in one of our sites. . (Federally qualified health center (FQHC) or community clinic providing care free or on sliding fee scale)*
- *[We are] also a teaching facility for UW and WSU Med Students as well as several universities for mid-levels. We provide an opportunity for Physician's to go through [our] Obstetrics Training plan. This allows physicians to train and become competent in the practice of OB delivery and care, including training on C-Sections. (Rural health clinic)*
- *We do offer a dental assistant apprenticeship but many don't know if they want to commit to the training or not. The training takes 13-15 months & this seems like such a long investment to them. Because we are having to grow our own, it means a huge investment of time, training & coaching. (FQHC)*

Employers in rural areas report unique challenges

Many employers report that attracting workers to rural areas and getting them to stay long-term are challenges

- *Lack of interest in moving to the area and our inability to compete with urban salaries. (Rural health clinic)*
- *Hard to recruit to such a remote location. (Small hospital)*
- *This is a rural area, commutes are often 45 - 60 minutes each way, too far for many staff members. (Nursing home or skilled nursing facility)*
- *Loan repayment opportunities make FQHC facilities attractive to new grads. Unfortunately, many of them move on once the loan repayment requirements are met. Often times providers are going to larger for profit organizations that have higher wages. (FQHC)*

In some cases, finding workers with the needed skills or qualifications has been difficult

- *OB RN has been very difficult to fill because of the lack of qualified candidates in the area, being in a rural location, and having low birth rates. (Small hospital)*
- *Rural healthcare requires providers to be excellent generalists who are highly motivated self-starters. Specialized providers often struggle to keep up. (Small hospital)*

Many employers use locums or travel contract workers to fill gaps

- *Provider turnover & burnout is a real issue, especially since the pandemic! We have been using locums to fill those gaps, but then we get complaints that people want to see a provider who is going to "stick around!" (FQHC)*
- *Finding Nursing staff is a challenge. A large portion of our staff is travelers. Travelers are always on the move. We have opened up no restriction PRN ["as needed"] positions, went through the process of how to get Canadian Travelers, recruiting new grad nurses. (Small hospital)*

Overarching Rural Workforce Issues

Currently, what are your organization's top workforce issues?

Most respondents representing facilities that primarily serve rural residents said: **recruiting new workers/filling vacancies** and **retaining current workers/increasing worker satisfaction**,

- *"It is difficult to draw folks to a rural location, we feel this is our number one challenge with recruitment."*
- *"We cannot change our rural location, so we work on job satisfaction, pay and benefits."*

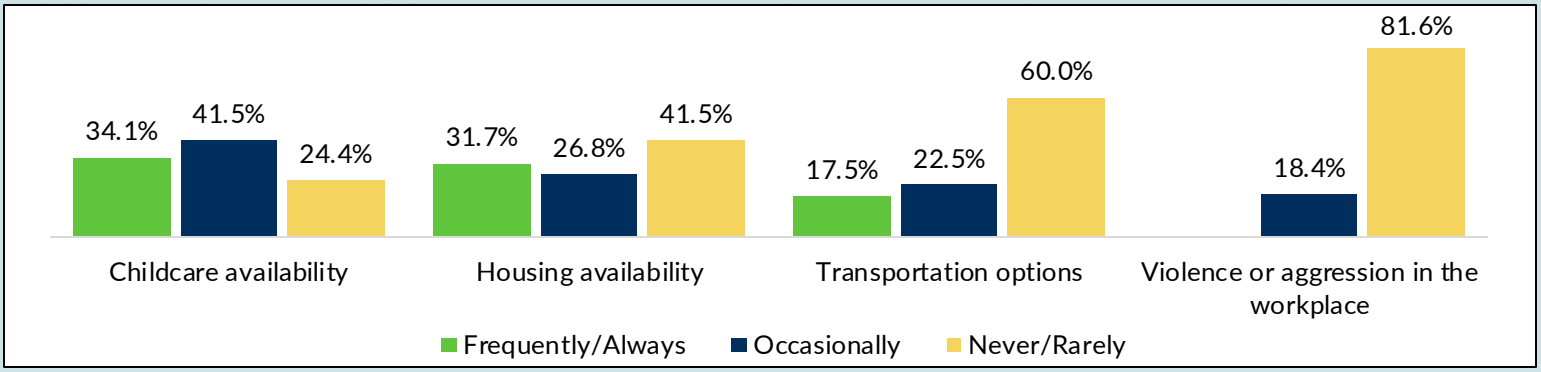
In the past year, has your organization supported "grow-your-own" programs (i.e., apprenticeships, residencies or on-the-job training opportunities) to train workers for specific roles?

Roughly two-thirds of respondents supported "grow-your-own" programs. The most common occupations mentioned for these programs were medical assistants (many through apprenticeships), nursing assistants and dental assistants.

Of the respondents who are not currently implementing these programs, about 27% said they have not explored options and about 10% said they have explored options but decided against implementation.

- *"A lot of our communities are in rural areas. Not a lot of choices of dates and sometime distance is an issue."*
- *"We don't yet have the infrastructure in place to look into this, including remote supervision and associated challenges." (Behavioral health agency)*

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



Childcare availability

- *"Almost no options for those that work 12-hour shifts or nights and weekends."*
- *"My community does not have certified childcare available for children under the age of three."*

Housing availability

- *"There are no houses or apartments available. When something does become available it is either very, very expensive or is in need a repair."*
- *"Rent is too high for our staff to live on a single income"*

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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