

Washington's Health Workforce SENTINEL NETWORK

Findings Brief: Dental Offices/Clinics

Spring 2026

This brief highlights workforce needs reported by Washington's **dental offices and clinics** to the Health Workforce Sentinel Network during **April/May 2026**. These facilities have contributed workforce insights since 2016, across 18 reporting periods. More findings are available at wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings.

Dentist Offices/Clinics

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies*							
Rank	Spring 2022	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023	Spring 2024	Spring 2025	Spring 2026
1	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist	Dental hygienist
2	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental hygienist	Dental assistant	Dental assistant	Dental assistant
3	Office personnel	Office personnel	Office personnel	Dentist	Dentist	Office personnel	Office personnel
4	Dentist	Dentist	Dentist	Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency	Office personnel	Dentist	Dentist

← Most cited

*Findings prior to Spring 2022 not shown due to space constraints. Occupations cited by the same number of responses share the same rank number.

Reasons for Exceptionally Long Vacancies

Some respondents highlighted the need for both more dental hygienists and dental assistants, noting that there are not enough recent graduates to meet demand as reasons for exceptionally long vacancies. Several respondents also noted issues around insurance reimbursements keeping pace with rising labor costs. For dental hygienists, frequently mentioned a lack of applicants and increasing wage pressures. For dental assistants, some respondents noted it can be difficult to hire for these roles due to lack of career progression, lower wages, and difficulties with on-the-job training. Examples include:

- [Dental hygienist] Few dental hygienists requesting wages that can not be covered by revenue generated from the treatment they provide.
- [Dental assistant] Very difficult to hire in our area because living costs are higher than [the wages] we can afford to offer. People have to drive long distances to apply for positions and our fees are tied to insurance schedules, so while costs for all products (especially labor) increase, our fees are stuck and in many cases, the reimbursements are going down. For example, many insurance companies no longer cover fluoride."
- [Dental assistant] No qualified applicants. Those that were willing to be trained OTJ discovered they did not like work in the mouth.

Reasons for retention/turnover problems

Respondents cited a range of factors contributing to turnover, including employees leaving the field, reducing their hours, relocating, or pursuing alternative employment. Some respondents pointed to compensation, job satisfaction, and limited advancement opportunities as factors contributing to turnover. Examples include:

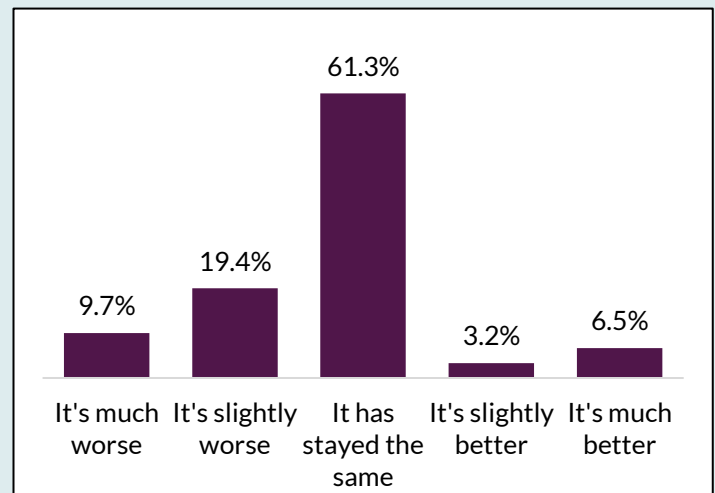
- [Dental assistant] Turnover due to lack of qualified applicants and having to try OJT to find the right person who could learn the needed skills and was okay working in the mouth.
- [Dental assistant] Limited educational and or upward mobility while still working to provide for family.
- [Dental hygienist] Hours, benefits and rate of pay.
- [Dental hygienist] People leaving the field and not being replaced or limiting their hours.

Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

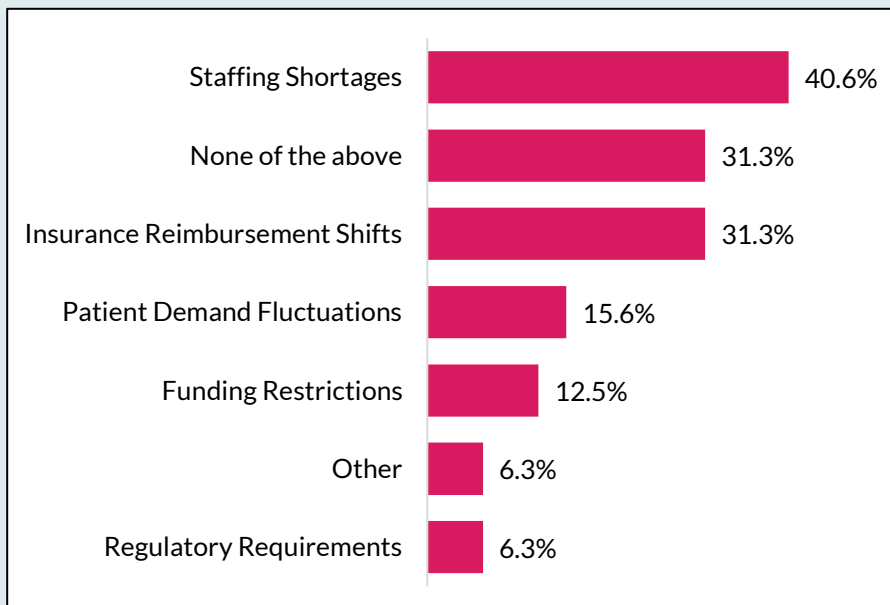
In the past year, how has your organization's ability to staff your facility/facilities changed?

A majority of respondents noted that their ability to staff their organization has stayed the same (61.3%) or is slightly worse than a year ago (19.4%).

- [Stayed the same] The situation hasn't changed. I [would like to] transition to part-time, but we can't find a full-time hygienist.
- [Stayed the same] There is always an ebb and flow, but in general the difficulties in staffing the positions listed have stayed constant in the past 5 years.
- [It's slightly worse] Reimbursement is too low to compensate for the higher wages new hires demand.



Has your organization recently taken steps or made plans to take steps to navigate uncertainty or prepare for potential changes in any of the following areas? (check all that apply) Responses included:

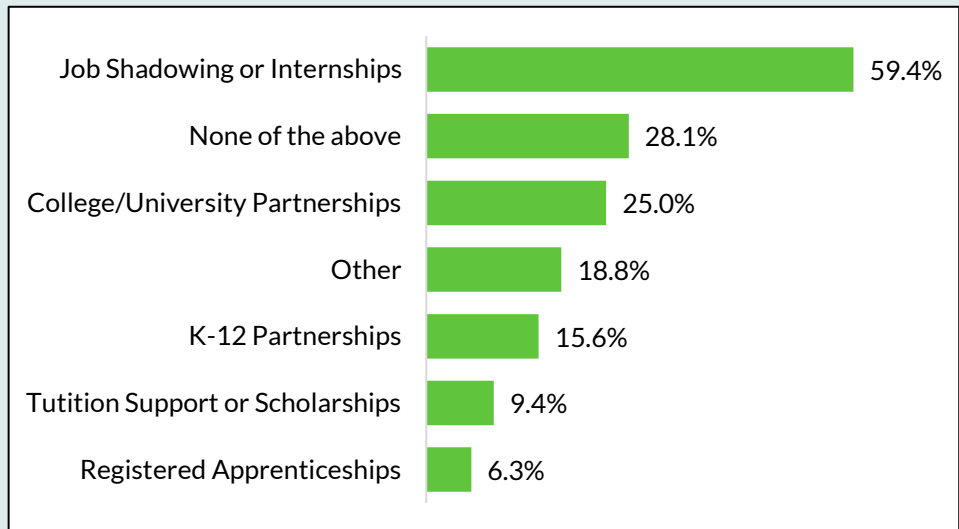


- We have delayed improvements in our business due to instability.
- We have to drop insurances as we work at a loss and shorten hours and can't care for the patients as they need.
- We exited all insurance contracts this past year. The reduction in insurance reimbursement made it impossible to recruit and retain high quality staff in [our area].
- Due to a lack of hygienists, we have increased assistants who will help the dentist complete routine cleanings for patients.

Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples (continued)

Which of the following workforce outreach, pipeline development, or early-career development strategies does your organization support? (check all that apply) Responses included:

- We have been a job internship site for local assisting programs.
- If we get anybody who would like to job shadow or do an externship related to their dental assistant/hygienist school, we welcome it fully.
- We even created a training program where we paid green associates and trained them over 90-day periods.

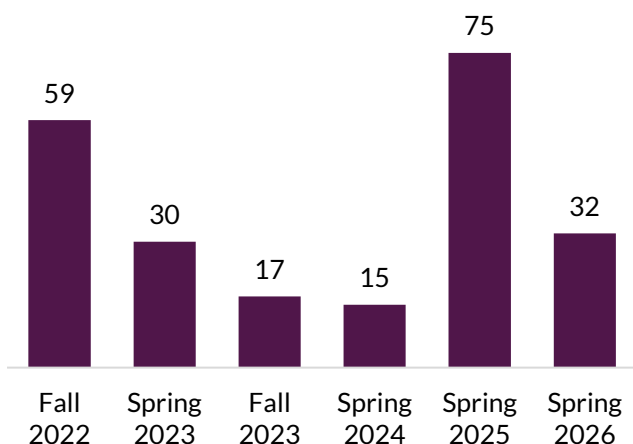


Has your organization adopted, or is it considering adopting, any new or existing technology?

About half of respondents from dental offices/clinics reported considering adopting or have adopted new technology to their facilities. This was a mix of using AI-based technologies or scaling up existing technology to improve workflow. Responses included:

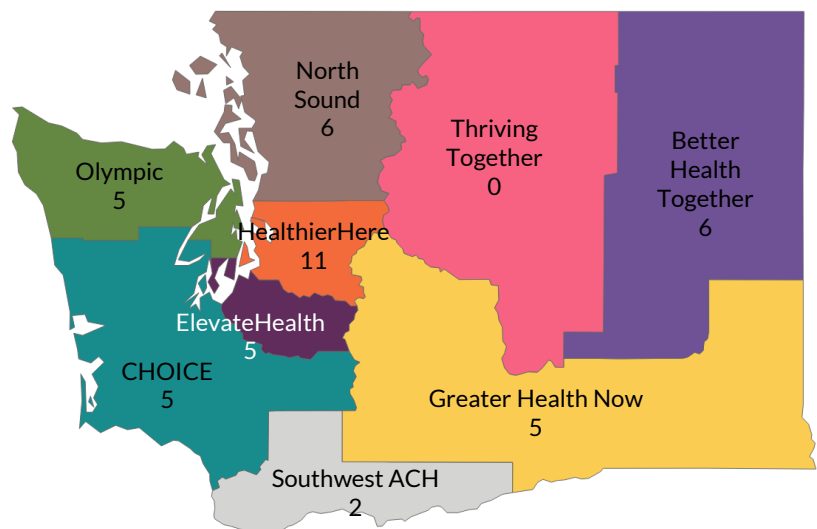
- Just starting to implement AI note taking; AI phone answering; AI marketing.
- Answering phones, text, appointment reminders, scheduling of appointments, insurance verification. The shift is to allow the humans to focus more on the patient experience while AI handles whatever tasks it can.
- We are local experts in cutting edge dental technology, scanning, milling, and 3d printing.
- Use of AI for insurance claim processing and automated appointment confirmation.

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



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

Number of Responding Dental Offices/Clinics by Accountable Community of Health (ACH), Spring 2026



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:

<https://wa.sentinelnetwork.org/>.

Contact: healthworkforce@wasentinelnetwork.org

Sentinel Network Team:

UW Center for Health Workforce Studies: Benjamin Stubbs, Grace Guenther,
Nhu Nguyen, Amy Clark, Susan Skillman

WA Workforce Board: Renee Fullerton, Donald Smith

