Washington's Health Workforce SENTINEL NETWORK

Findings Brief: *Rural Health Clinics*

Spring 2026

This brief highlights workforce needs reported by Washington's **rural health clinics (federally certified)** 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.

Rural Health Clinics

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies*

Rank	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023	Spring 2024	Spring 2025	Spring 2026
1	Medical assistant Registered nurse Physician/ Surgeon	Medical Assistant	Medical Assistant Physician/ Surgeon	Not enough responses to support meaningful findings.**	Physician/ Surgeon Medical Assistant	Six of 14 respondents reported no occupations with exceptionally long vacancies.**
2	Mental health counselor Office staff/ Front desk staff/ Scheduler	Office staff/ Front desk staff/ Scheduler	Nurse practitioner Registered nurse Office staff/ Front desk staff/ Scheduler		Registered nurse	
3	Marriage & family therapist Nurse practitioner	Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency	Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency		Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency	
4	Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency					

← Most cited

Occupations cited by the same number of responses share the same rank number.
***Responses shown are from data collection dates with sufficiently large numbers of responses from large hospitals to support meaningful findings.*

Reasons for Exceptionally Long Vacancies and Turnover/Retention Problems

Compared to prior rounds, more respondents from rural health clinics (federally certified) reported that exceptionally long vacancies and turnover/retention challenges did not affect their ability to fully staff positions or provide services. This round, 43% indicated that no occupations were affected, suggesting staffing challenges were less widespread than in previous rounds.

Among respondents who identified occupations affected by exceptionally long vacancies, common reasons included a lack of qualified applicants, difficulties recruiting to rural areas, and compensation that could not compete with larger or urban employers. For example:

- *[Medical assistant] Medical Assistants have seemed to decrease in the candidate pool over the past few years… difficulties with recruiting rural have made it difficult to attract quality MAs.*

Similarly, among respondents who reported retention and turnover challenges, rural workforce recruitment and retention remained a persistent concern. Respondents cited limited applicant pools, competition from larger health systems, and compensation disparities as key barriers. For example:

- *[Nurse practitioner] Experienced individuals do not want to live in rural areas.*

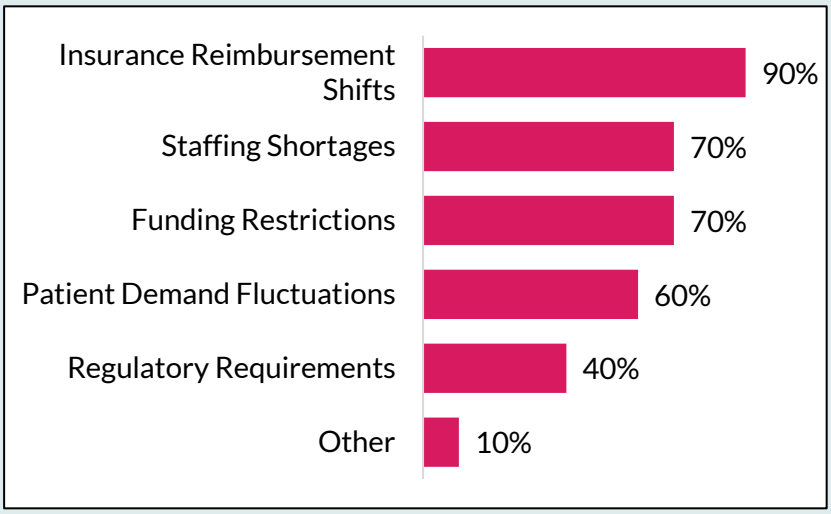
Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

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

Respondents noted that their ability to staff their organization has stayed the same (58%) or is slightly better than a year ago (42%).

- [Stayed the same] *We have had turnover in medical assistants, but the rest of our staffing has been stable.*
- [It's slightly better] *Our recruitment team has done well, and we have seen temporary manpower drop due to recruitment and onboarding.*

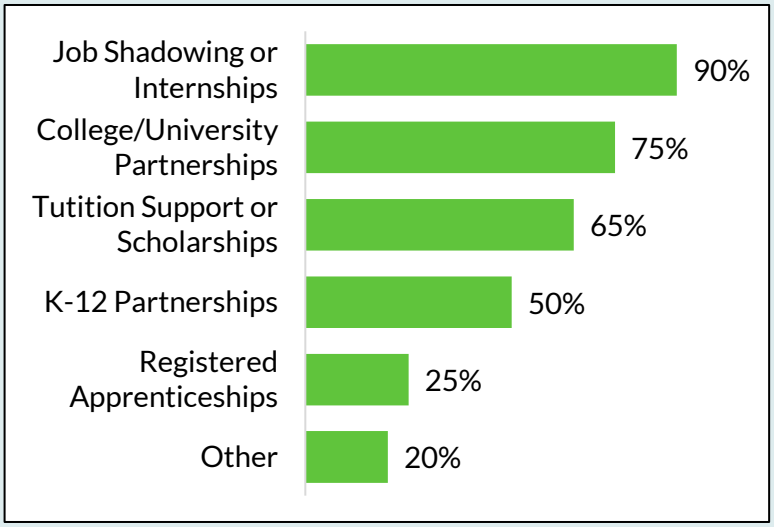
Has your organization recently taken steps or made plans to take steps to navigate uncertainty or prepare for potential changes in any of the following areas? (check all that apply)



- *All financial decisions are considered carefully, and a very fiscally conservative approach is being taken at present with staffing in certain programs we expect to be most effected.*
- *Strategizing what added services to generate revenue, work with staff we have and cross train.*

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

- *[Our organization] has their own Medical Assistant Apprentice program. We partner with the 2 most local colleges for the Medical Assistant program and RN program to host extern students. At my location, 4 out of the 5 MA's came from the local community college MA program after doing their extern in this clinic.*
- *Mostly it has been pre-medical or pre-clinical people shadowing. We also have supervised nurse practitioner and PA students doing pediatric clerkships. This hasn't directly benefitted us because those clinicians are easier to hire.*

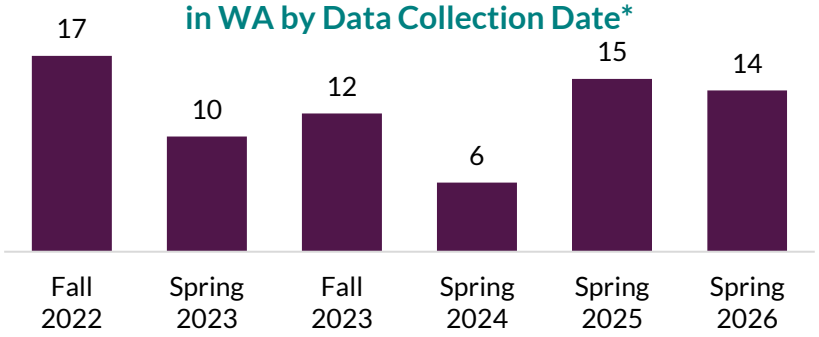


Has your organization adopted, or is it considering adopting, any new or existing technology?

Two-thirds of respondents from rural health clinics indicated that they are considering or have already adopted new technology, including AI, with varying degrees of success and for multiple uses.

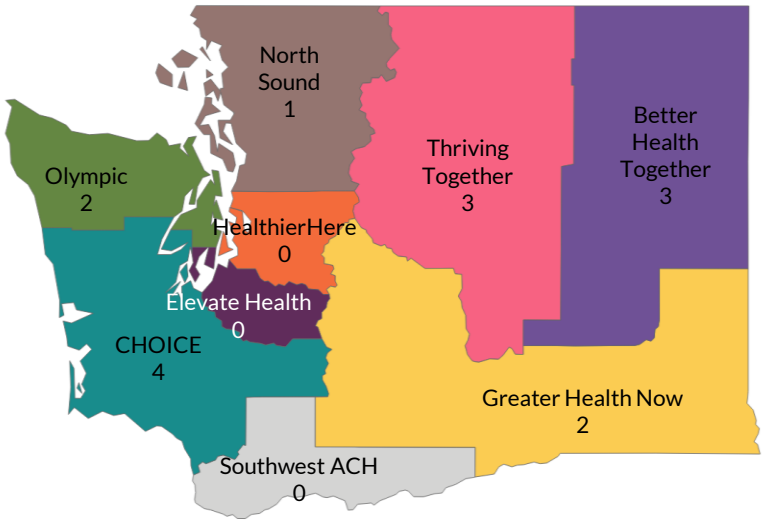
- *We have virtual scribe for providers which has in turn increased chart closure time and work life balance for providers […] We also still offer Virtual Visits for patients that don't have transportation.*
- *We are using AI some to help with documentation, but it has been underwhelming.*

Number of Responses from Rural Health Clinics in WA by Data Collection Date*



Responses prior to Fall 2022 not shown due to space constraints.

Number of Responding Rural Health 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:
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