Washington's Health Workforce SENTINEL NETWORK

Findings Brief: *Small Hospitals*

Spring 2026

This brief highlights workforce needs reported by Washington's **acute care hospitals (25 beds or less, "small hospitals")** 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.

Small Hospitals*

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies

Rank	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023	Spring 2024	Spring 2025	Spring 2026
1	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Radiologic technologist/ technician
2	Cook / Food services	Medical / Clinical lab technologist	Environmental services	Nursing assistant	Physical therapist	Diagnostic Medical Sonographer
				Physician/ Surgeon		Social Worker (Healthcare)
						Mental health counselor
3	Nursing assistant	Medical / Clinical lab technician	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Mental health counselor	Diagnostic Medical Sonographer	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency
		Nursing assistant		Social worker (Healthcare)	Occupational therapist	
					Respiratory Therapist	
					Speech-language therapist	

← Most cited

*Findings prior to Fall 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 and Retention/Turnover Problems

Respondents attributed both exceptionally long vacancies and turnover/retention challenges to shortages of qualified applicants, particularly for specialized roles, as well as rural recruitment barriers, housing and commuting challenges, competition from larger employers, and limited local workforce availability. Examples include:

- *[Multiple occupations] Hard to recruit for location, lack of qualified applicants, travelers are currently filling these roles.*
- *[Social worker] Turnover, need additional support and behavior health is lacking in the community.*
- *[Registered nurse] We get runs of qualified RN candidates. However, most are for per diem work and do not last more than a couple months due to the travel time from their locations. We are rural with the nearest cities 40 minutes or 1 hour 15 minutes away. This makes attracting talent difficult.*
- *[Registered nurse] We struggle with retaining per diem staffing… they cannot do the drive anymore… there is no housing that the organization can provide, or that the community has available.*
- *[Registered nurse] Competitive offers in larger facilities [and] specialties.*

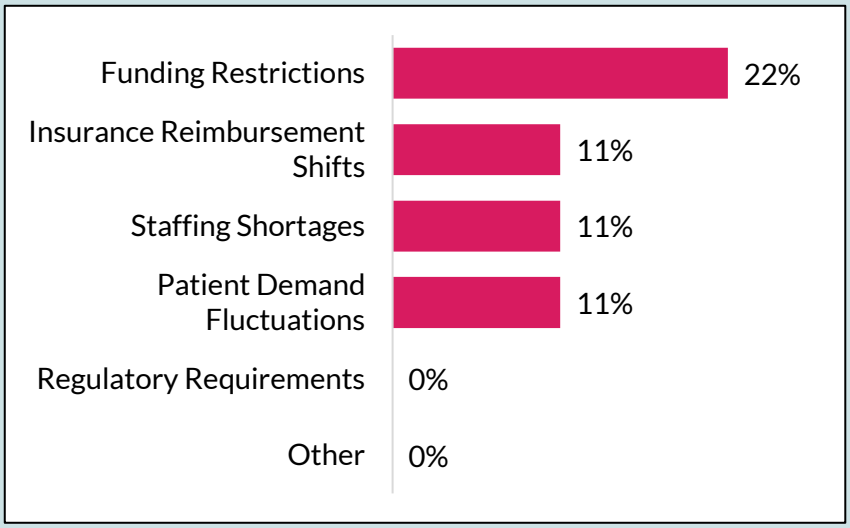
Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

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

Respondents indicated that their ability to staff their organizations has either stayed the same (57%) or is slightly better (43%) than a year ago.

- *[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.*
- *[Stayed the same] Roughly the same supplemented by travel staff.*
- *[It's slightly better] Have filled some hard to fill positions within the last year. Provider recruitment has been going well.*

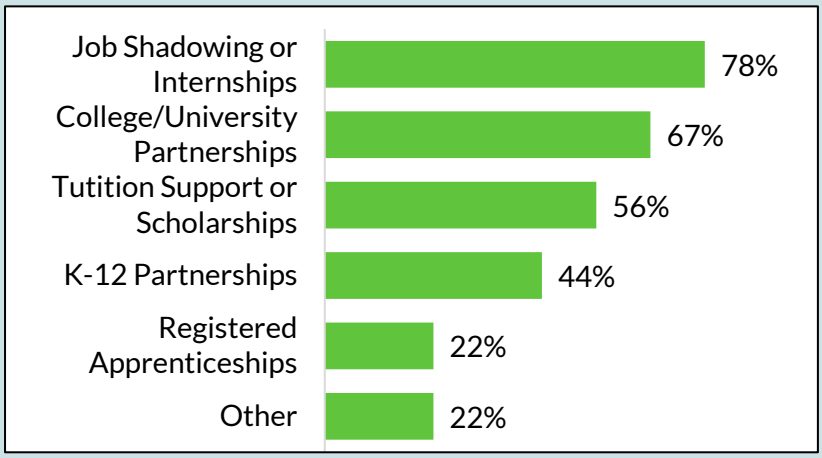
Has your organization recently taken steps or made plans to take steps to navigate uncertainty or prepare for potential changes in any of the following areas? (check all that apply) Responses included:



- *We are a public hospital with a population that is largely Medicare/Medicaid… Our organization has worked with insurance groups… to get better negotiated contracts for reimbursement rates… Our Acute Care/Swing program has seen a change in census. It has been difficult to justify more staffing… Staffing shortages [are] a top issue… We have tried to focus on internal float pools and education provided.*
- *Added additional positions to prepare for affects of the Big Beautiful Bill.*

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 students shadow in ED, family medical, and acute care. we have a MA apprentice program, we partner with local CC and [university] for students in lab, radiology, nursing and 3rd years med students. We have an annual loan reimbursement program and a scholarship though our foundation.*
- *CNA Classes, MA Apprenticeship, Job Shadowing for High School Students, Clinical Rotations for Med Students and Nursing Students.*

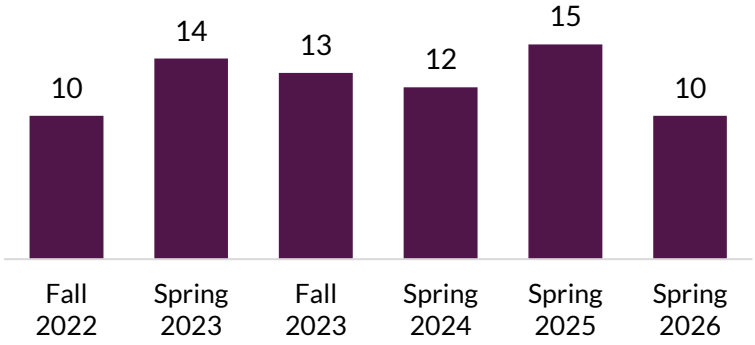


Has your organization adopted, or is it considering adopting, any new or existing technology?

About half of respondents from small hospitals reported considering adopting or have adopted new technology to their facilities. Responses included:

- *AI has been a topic in our organization of recent. Our Finance department is currently looking at ways in which AI can be used to reduce data entry and save time for the department to focus on vendor communication and financial strategizing. Overall, our staff is open to the use of AI but are not comfortable with leaning into how much it could help them.*

Number of Responses from Small Hospitals in WA by Data Collection Date*



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

Number of Responding Small Hospitals 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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