Understanding Health Workforce Demand During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond Using a Network of Policymakers and Industry Employers

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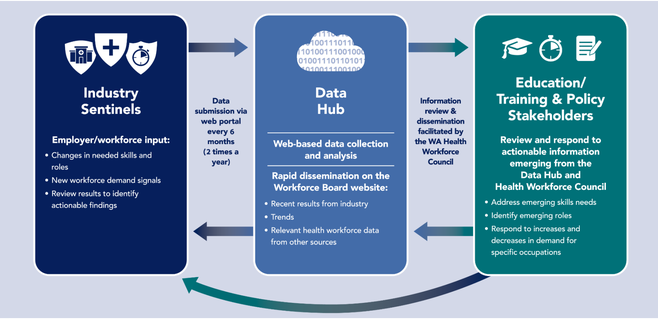
WASHINGTON'S HEALTH WORKFORCE SENTINEL NETWORK

Since 2016, the Health Workforce Sentinel Network has supported efficient and effective health workforce preparation and deployment by:

- **Identifying emerging signals** of changes in the occupations, skills, and roles needed to deliver quality care.
- Tracking and identifying **trends over time**.
- **Rapidly disseminating information** to education, training and policy partners who can respond to findings.



Questions asked of employers every 6 months:

- *Occupations experiencing exceptionally long vacancies*
- *Occupations with exceptional turnover*
- *New occupations that they did not previously employ*
- *New roles for existing employees*
- *Changes in orientation/onboarding procedures for new employees*
- *Changes in training priorities for existing employees*
- *Does your facility serve urban, rural or a mix of urban and rural clients?*

- With a focus on qualitative input about which, how, and reasons why

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Developed a set of questions on "topics of interest"

- Topics identified by policymakers and project team
- Regular consultation with stakeholders and partners
- Focus on quick and open dissemination of responses

CASE STUDY: SKILLED NURSING FACILITIES (SNFs)

Pre-Pandemic (Fall 2019):

- Can't match wages from other sectors, especially hospitals
- Regulatory requirements felt to be burdensome

"[We are] offering up to $43/hour with $7500 sign-on bonus. Not able to compete with hospital rates and have to meet regulatory requirements."

- Residents with higher acuity problems, including mental health issues, cited as a reason for high staff turnover

"Patient acuity has increased... leading to increased turnover. Staff in this position are immediately exhausted by the demand of the position. Many do not continue in healthcare as a result."

Early Pandemic (Spring and Fall 2020):

- Obtaining PPE and cleaning supplies is a top priority
- Many facilities reduced census, but still had difficulties fully staffing due to reduced staff pools and illness of workers
- Some organizations are turning to staffing agencies but report high expense and some inexperienced workers. Many new roles for existing staff are reported

"Staffing was the biggest challenge in both nursing and housekeeping. Information about this disease was evolving daily and staff were scared, testing was taking 7 + days. It was a daily challenge to keep adequate PPE available and following CDC recommendations."

Middle of the Pandemic (Spring and Fall 2021):

- Many workers reported to leave for higher-paying agency positions or "safer" jobs outside of health care
- Some turnover reported due to vaccine requirements, but education/incentive campaigns generally effective
- On top of their new care roles, workers provide emotional support to residents due to family visitation restrictions
- Many facilities struggle due to limited staffing options

"Demands on care staff have drastically increased while simultaneously staff resources have been drastically decreasing [leading to] mandatory overtime, high burnout rates, angry staff, [impacting] the amount and level of care [for] residents."

Late Pandemic (Spring and Fall 2022):

- Renewed focus on recruitment and retention strategies, including payment/benefit increases and recognition programs
- Many facilities still rely on agency staffing to fill absences
- Childcare support, housing subsidies and transportation benefits all cited as social supports needed to maintain staffing

"We are offering flexible schedules, we have employee assistance programs, tuition reimbursement. Creating more flexibility with our schedules has shown some improvement [but] other [benefits] have not."

Top occupations cited as having exceptionally long vacancies by date of reporting

Rank	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Fall 2021	Spring 2022	Fall 2022
1	Registered nurse	Nursing assistant	Nursing assistant	Nursing assistant	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Nursing assistant
2	Nursing assistant	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Nursing assistant	Licensed practical nurse Nursing assistant	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse Registered nurse
3	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse Dentist	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse	Occupational therapist Physical therapist	Nursing assistant	Cook / Food services
4	Occupational therapy assistant Physical therapist Social worker Psychologist	Speech-language therapist	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Occupational therapy assistant Physical therapist Physical Therapy Assistant	Occupational therapist Physical therapist Social worker Speech-language therapist	Speech-language therapist	Cook / Food services	Dietitian / Nutritionist

← Most cited

VALUE PROVIDED BY SENTINEL NETWORK

- Described specific workforce impacts of the pandemic in many heath care settings (only SNFs shown here, but see weblink below for other settings)
- Guided Washington's Health Workforce Council strategy and legislative recommendations
  - Multiple bills passed this session addressing health workforce needs, including increasing social supports for workers
- Supported initiatives to improve training and regulation of state's behavioral health workforce
- Used by organizations to support funding applications

SUMMARY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Washington Health Workforce Sentinel Network:

- Worked with partners to identify "topics of interest" using established connections and infrastructure
- Identified top COVID-19 employer priorities and quickly disseminated findings to inform policy decisions
- Developed an information sharing strategy can be used in future emergencies and adapted to understand developing workforce needs

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For more information

View findings for 2016 – 2023 and more healthcare settings:

https://wa.sentinelnetwork.org

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WASHINGTON Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Board