

Building and Sustaining Washington's Oral Health Workforce: Career Pathways for Dental Assistants, Dental Hygienists, and Dentists

December 2025

BACKGROUND

Demand for oral health care in Washington is high, yet access and utilization are uneven across the state, due in part to the uneven [supply of the oral health workforce](#). [Employer demand data](#) has repeatedly shown vacancies for dental assistants and dental hygienists in Washington, with ongoing difficulty recruiting and retaining these positions. This is also true nationally, where about one-third of [dentists surveyed in 2023](#) reported ongoing active recruitment of dental hygienists and dental assistants, and it was “extremely or very challenging” to recruit for these positions.

This brief explores the career pathways of dental assistants, dental hygienists, and dentists in Washington, highlighting opportunities to strengthen their recruitment, retention, and professional advancement. Understanding the various ways workers enter, progress, and remain in the oral health workforce is essential for designing interventions to address shortages and support workforce stability and equity.

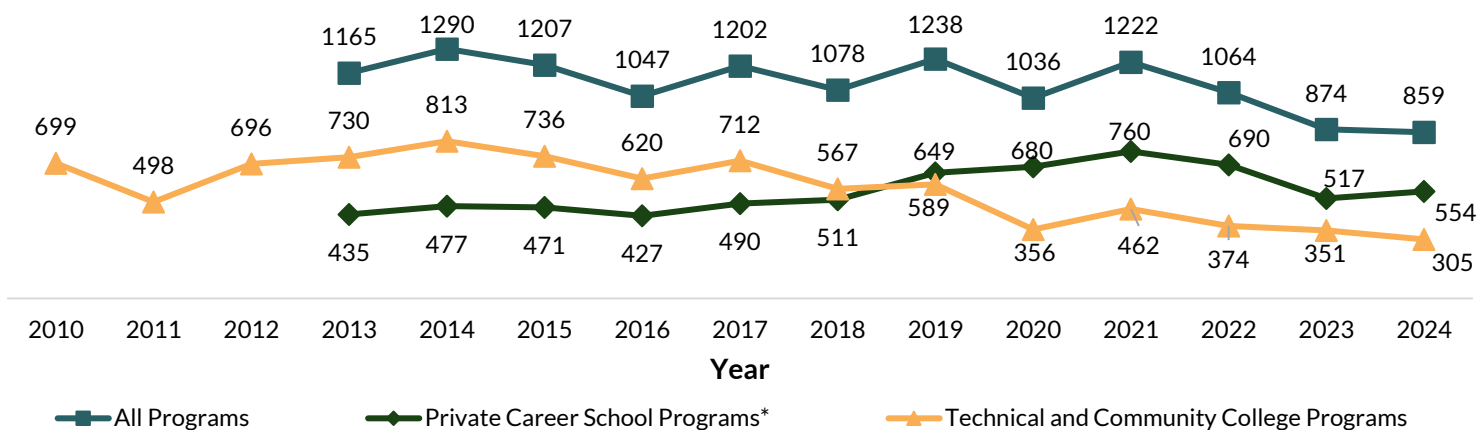
DENTAL ASSISTANTS

Dental Assistant Education Pathways

There are multiple routes to becoming a dental assistant in Washington State. Formal dental assistant training typically involves completing an education/training program at a public technical school, community college, or private career program, ranging from 9 weeks to 2 years. Dental assistants can also be trained through apprenticeships, community and technical education (CTE) programs, and on-the-job.

Fewer dental assistants are completing programs at Washington's public community colleges and technical schools while growing numbers are graduating from private programs (Figure 1). The number of new dental assistants completing these education programs in the state has slowly decreased from 2010 to 2024.

Figure 1. Dental Assisting Program Completions in Washington State, 2010-2024



Source: The U.S. Department of Education's national database, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Completions from "Technical and Community College Programs" are from IPEDS. Completion and counts for "private career school programs" are from data compiled by the Washington Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board from the Web-based Data and Reporting System, and only available for analysis beginning in 2013.



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Dental Assistant Education Pathways (continued)

A [2023 survey of Washington dental assistants](#) conducted by the University of Washington Center for Health Workforce Studies (UW CHWS) Washington Oral Health Workforce Tracking Program (WOHW) found that most respondents received their training in Washington. Among all respondents, dental assistants most commonly completed their training from a public community college or technical school program, on-the-job training, or a private college or technical school program (Table 1).

Table 1. Educational Background of Dental Assistant (DA) Survey Respondents Currently Working in Washington (2023)

Responding DAs in Washington	% of 865
<i>Location of highest level of DA education/training</i>	
Washington state	81.6%
Another U.S. state or territory	13.3%
Outside the U.S.	5.1%
<i>Type of DA educational/training programs completed</i>	
Public community college or technical school DA program (9+ months)	35.3%
On the job - no additional training	21.4%
Private college or technical school DA program (9+ months)	18.2%
Private training DA program (12 weeks or fewer)	14.2%
High school occupational skills center program	3.7%
Paid apprenticeship program	2.7%
Online dental assistant education program	1.5%
Dentist training, including outside the U.S.	1.1%
Military training or experience	0.5%
Other	1.5%

Source: Pollack SW, Guenther GA, Stubbs BA, Patterson DG, Frogner BK, Skillman SM. Characteristics of the Current Dental Assistant and Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary Workforces in Washington State. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, May 2024.
Note: Percent calculations do not include missing data.

Dental Assistant Career Progression and Work History

Prior to becoming a dental assistant, it is common to have worked in another role in the dental or health care field. Respondents from a [2023 UW CHWS WOHW survey](#) indicated they had previously worked in another health occupation in Washington, and/or in another dental position (Table 2). Of these respondents, working in a front desk/office or other administrative role was the most frequently held previous position (Table 3).

Dental Assistant Career Motivations and Future Plans

National studies of the U.S. dental assisting workforce have found that dental assistants frequently face limited career advancement opportunities, resulting in dental assistants temporarily leaving the workforce to pursue additional education or credentialing. While there are multiple entry points to becoming a dental assistant in Washington, there are limited career advancement opportunities.

National studies have found that both dental assistants and dental hygienists may have to temporarily leave the workforce to complete education programs to advance in the field. For example, for dental assistants to become dental hygienists.

WOHW research shows that this pattern also holds in Washington, 10.5% of dental assistant respondents to a 2023 UW CHWS WOHW survey reported being currently enrolled in an academic program for a degree in health care, of which 40.5% were in dental hygiene, and a total of 58.3% were enrolled in another type of oral health-related degree program (Table 4).

When indicating their future career plans, 42.4% of responding dental assistants indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they planned to begin an education program to advance to another dental occupation within the next five years (Figure 2). Having other family members in health care or working in the dental field were highlighted by survey respondents as important career motivators for becoming a dental assistant.

Table 2. Work History of Dental Assistant (DA) Survey Respondents in Washington (2023)

Responding DAs in Washington	% of 865
Previously worked in another healthcare occupation	16.0%
Previously worked in other dental position prior to becoming a DA	14.5%
Have a current license/credential in another health occupation in WA	13.6%

Note: Percent calculations do not include missing data.

Table 3. Work History of Dental Assistant Survey Respondents in Washington (2023)

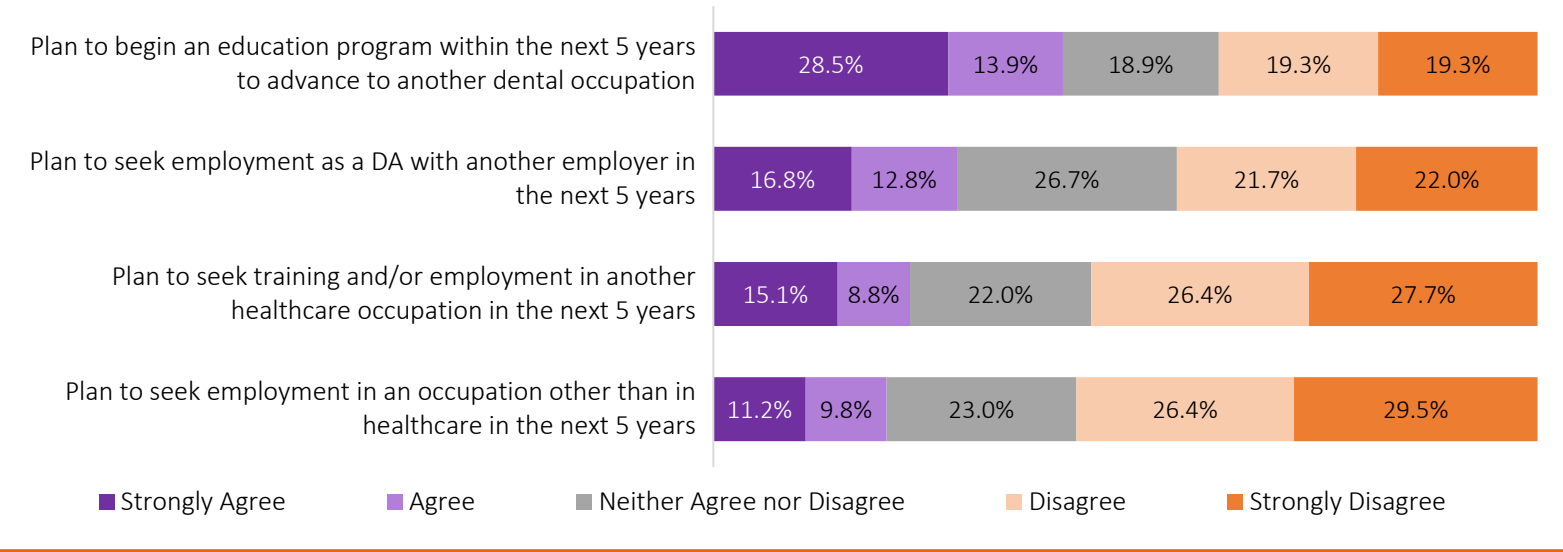
Dental positions in which survey respondents previously worked	% of 118
Front desk/office/administration	67.8%
Sterilization	15.3%
Dentist*	12.7%
Other	3.4%
Health occupations in which survey respondents have another credential	% of 112
Other dental occupation	13.4%
Dental anesthesia assistant	6.3%
Dental hygienist	1.8%
Expanded function dental auxiliary	5.4%
Other health care occupation	33.0%
Medical assistant	5.4%
Nursing assistant	8.0%
Other non-health care occupation	9.8%
Other, unknown	43.8%

Tables source: Pollack SW, Guenther GA, Stubbs BA, Patterson DG, Frogner BK, Skillman SM. Characteristics of the Current Dental Assistant and Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary Workforces in Washington State. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, May 2024.

Note: Percent calculations do not include missing data.

Dental Assistant Career Motivations and Future Plans (continued)

Figure 2. Future Career Plans of Dental Assistants (DAs) in Washington (2023)



Source: Pollack SW, Guenther GA, Stubbs BA, Patterson DG, Frogner BK, Skillman SM. Characteristics of the Current Dental Assistant and Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary Workforces in Washington State. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, May 2024.

Note: Percent calculations do not include missing data. 'Don't Know' and 'Not Applicable' responses are not included in percent calculations. N=865

Table 4. Health Care Program Types Among Dental Assistant (DA) Respondents Currently Enrolled in an Academic Program for a Certificate or Degree in Health Care (2023)

Program type identified by responding DAs	% of 79
Dental hygiene	40.5%
Expanded function dental auxiliary	8.9%
Nursing (pre-, LPN, or RN)	7.6%
Clinical occupation (non-nursing)	7.6%
Dentistry	6.3%
Dental therapy	1.3%
Denturist	1.3%
Other	26.6%

Source: Pollack SW, Guenther GA, Stubbs BA, Patterson DG, Frogner BK, Skillman SM. Characteristics of the Current Dental Assistant and Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary Workforces in Washington State. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, May 2024.

Note: 'Other' includes various undergraduate Bachelor's and graduate degree programs and program topics in unspecified degree types. Percent calculations do not include missing values.

DENTAL HYGIENISTS

Dental Hygienist Education Pathways

There are multiple educational pathways to becoming a dental hygienist in Washington, with a majority of [2024 survey respondents](#) split between associate and bachelor-level degrees (Table 5). Incumbent dental hygienists can also pursue master’s degrees in dental hygiene to advance their careers in leadership, health care, and education. Results from our [recent survey of dental hygienists](#) show that three in four completed their dental hygiene education/training in Washington State. Half of respondents completed an associate’s degree, 45.4% a bachelor’s degree.

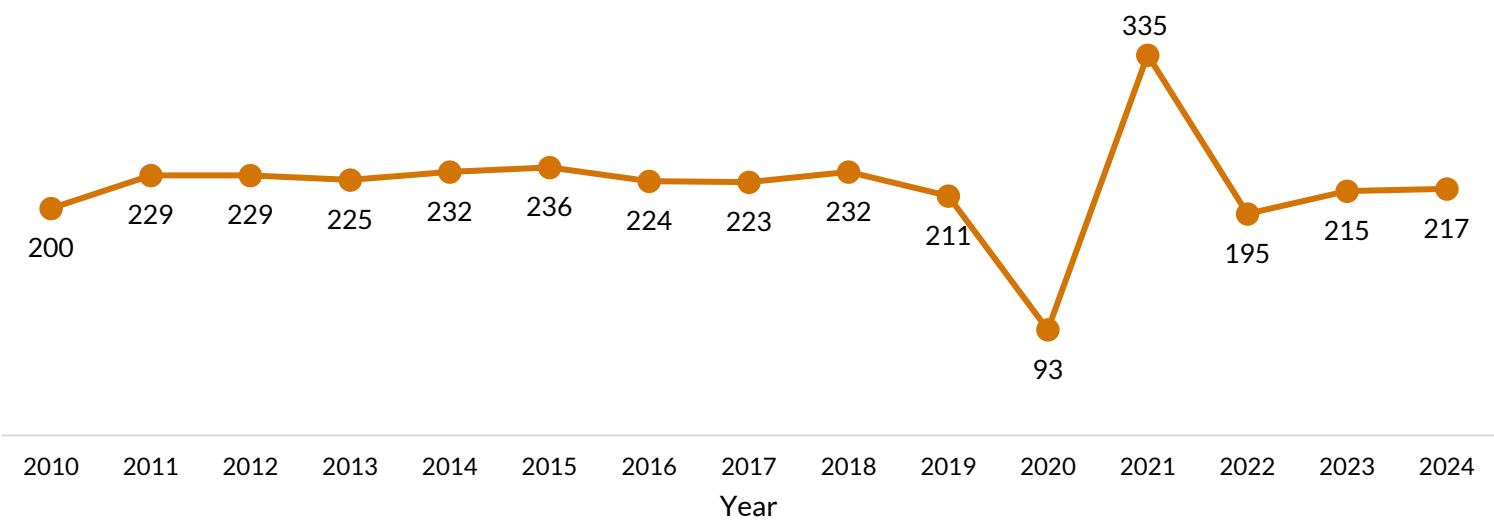
Over the past decade, degree completions from dental hygiene programs in Washington have remained stable, apart from fluctuations from 2020-2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 3).

Table 5. Educational Background of Dental Hygienist (DH) Survey Respondents Currently Working in Washington (2024)

Responding DHs in Washington	% of 839
<i>Location of initial dental hygienist education/training</i>	
Washington state	75.6%
Another U.S. state or territory	23.7%
Outside the U.S.	0.6%
<i>Type of dental hygiene educational/training programs completed</i>	
Associate degree	49.9%
Bachelor’s degree	45.4%
Post-baccalaureate/graduate (Master’s or Doctoral) degree	3.5%
Other	0.5%

Source: Guenther GA, Pollack SW, Stubbs BA, Frogner BK, Skillman SM. Characteristics of the Current Dental Hygienist Workforce in Washington State. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, August 2024.
Note: ‘Other’ includes dental assisting programs of unspecified training types, and additional programs of unspecified degree types. Percent calculations do not include missing data.

Figure 3. Dental Hygiene Program Completions in Washington State, 2001-2024



Source: The U.S. Department of Education’s national database, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). IPEDS may not capture completions from programs that don’t receive federal funding, or individuals who may have entered the profession through on-the-job training or apprenticeship arrangements.

Dental Hygienist Career Progression and Work History

It is common for dental assisting to be part of the work history and career progression of current dental hygienists. Half of respondents to a [2024 UW CHWS WOHW survey](#) of dental hygienists indicated that they worked in another oral health position prior to becoming hygienist. Among those with previous oral health experience, 83.2% worked as a dental assistant and 25.6% worked in an administrative position in a dental clinic (Table 6).

Dental Hygienist Career Motivations and Future Plans

The majority of responding dental hygienists to the [2024 UW CHWS WOHW survey](#) indicated interest in continuing to work as a hygienist in clinical practice (Table 7). Very few respondents indicate interest in changing their role or advancing to another dental occupation.

Table 6. Work History of Dental Hygienist (DH) Survey Respondents Currently Working in Washington (2024)

Responding DHs in Washington	% of 839
Worked in other dental position prior to becoming a DH	50.6%
<i>Previous dental position held among dental hygienists who worked in another dental position prior to becoming a dental hygienist*</i>	<i>n=411</i>
Dental assistant	83.2%
Expanded function dental auxiliary	5.1%
Administration (e.g., front office, billing)	25.6%
Sterilization	7.5%
Dental lab technician	0.7%
Other	2.7%

Source: Guenther GA, Pollack SW, Stubbs BA, Frogner BK, Skillman SM. Characteristics of the Current Dental Hygienist Workforce in Washington State. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, August 2024.
*Participants could select more than one option; percent calculations may not add up to 100%.
Note: Percent calculations do not include missing data.

Table 7. Future Plans of Dental Hygienist (DH) Survey Respondents Currently Working in Washington (2024)

Responding DHs in Washington	% of 839
Continue working as a dental hygienist in clinical practice	72.5%
Retire or otherwise leave dental practice	14.2%
Change my primary role from dental hygienist in clinical practice to a non-clinical role such as dental educator or administrator/manager	5.7%
Continue working in a non-clinical role, such as dental educator or administrator/manager	3.8%
Begin an education program within the next 5 years that would allow me to advance to another dental occupation	2.5%
Transition to myofunctional therapist	0.6%
Other	0.6%
Move from non-clinical role to clinical dental hygiene practice	0.1%

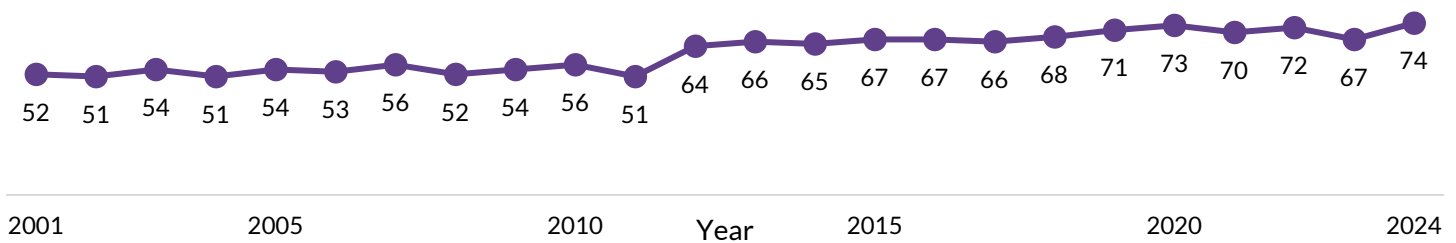
Source: Guenther GA, Pollack SW, Stubbs BA, Frogner BK, Skillman SM. Characteristics of the Current Dental Hygienist Workforce in Washington State. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, August 2024.
Note: Percent calculations do not include missing data.

DENTISTS

Dentist Education Pathways

Fewer than half of Washington's practicing dentists in 2017 completed dental school in Washington. Those with Doctor of Dental Science degrees from in-state obtained them from the University of Washington School of Dentistry (UW). Pacific Northwest University School of Dental Medicine (PNWU), a new dental school in Washington State, opened in 2025. This new program will graduate students with a four-year postbaccalaureate Doctor of Dental Medicine degree.

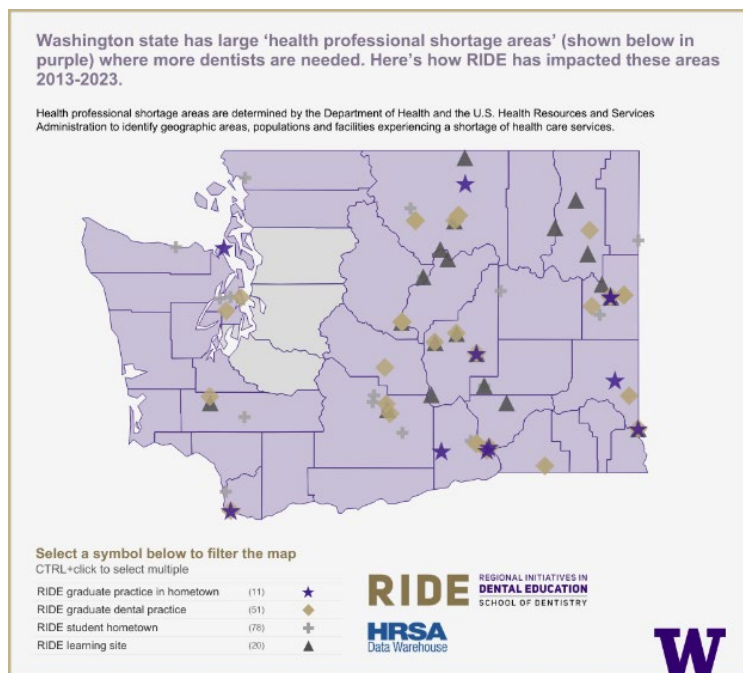
Figure 4. Dentistry Program Completions in Washington State, 2001-2024



Source: The U.S. Department of Education's national database, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Note: All completions to date are from the University of Washington. The Pacific Northwest University School of Dental Medicine will graduate its first cohort of students in 2029.

Figure 5. UW Rural Initiatives in Dental Education (RIDE) Learning Sites and Practice Locations of Graduates (2024)



Dental completions from the UW School of Dentistry have slowly increased from 2010-2024 (Figure 4). Figure 4 does not yet include completions data from PNWU, whose inaugural cohort will graduate in 2029.

Of the roughly 70 spots available in the UW Dentistry program each year, 16 are designated for students who participate in the Regional Initiatives in Dental Education (RIDE) program (approximately 22%). RIDE is a UW program that trains dentists to meet the needs of rural and underserved populations in the state and region. Research indicates that dentists trained by RIDE in rural areas have shown to be more likely to continue working in rural areas, due to this rural exposure during their training. For example, according to program data, 70% of recent RIDE graduates ended up practicing in rural and underserved areas in the state (Figure 5).

Source: University of Washington. UW rural dentistry program helping to fill vital need across Washington. Published March 21, 2024. <https://www.washington.edu/forwashington/uw-rural-dentistry-program-helping-to-fill-vital-need-seeks-to-double-in-size/>

OPPORTUNITIES AND TAKEAWAYS

Meeting the demand for Washington's oral health workforce faces persistent challenges. Uneven access and utilization remain a challenge, particularly in rural and underserved areas, making workforce distribution as important as overall supply.

Over the past decade, completions for dental assisting programs have declined, and the number of dental hygienists and dentists trained in-state has remained largely flat. While some dental assistants or hygienists may pursue advancement within oral health, others transition to different health sectors, underscoring the need for flexible and transferable career options.

WOHW has mapped the education and work history of dental assistants, dental hygienists, and dentists in Washington. There are opportunities for dental assistants to advance their careers within oral health, although there are fewer opportunities among hygienists to progress further in the profession. The emergence of dental therapists may help expand access, especially in underserved communities. The opening of PNWU's dental program and the expansion of UW's RIDE program increases local dentist training capacity and will likely increase overall workforce supply.

Licensed dental therapy presents a new pathway into Washington's oral health workforce, with the potential to serve as a bridge for dental assistant and dental hygienists seeking career advancement. Not much is known about the work history and career motivations of people entering this emerging field; more research in this area is needed. The emergence of dental therapists offers an avenue to expand access, particularly in underserved and rural communities where workforce shortages and access to oral health remain challenging.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing both supply and career mobility in the oral health workforce. Expanding educational opportunities, improving pathways for advancement, and supporting retention can help maintain workforce supply to meet oral health needs across the state. Continued attention to flexible training options and career progression will be key to building a workforce that can adapt to changing needs and provide consistent access to care statewide.

Methods & Data Sources: Much of the data included in this brief is drawn from existing analyses conducted by the Washington Oral Health Workforce (WOHW) Tracking Program of the Center for Health Workforce Studies at the University of Washington. To learn more about the demographics and distribution of oral health workforce professionals, education and training pathways, employer demand, among other topics visit: <https://familymedicine.uw.edu/chws/resources/wohw/>.

The Washington Oral Health Workforce (WOHW) Tracking Program, is supported by Delta Dental of Washington and the Washington State Legislature. WOHW provides critical data to improve workforce development in oral health and guide practice and policy to help ensure the state's population has access to needed oral health care. More information can be found at: <https://familymedicine.uw.edu/chws/resources/wohw/>.

Suggested citation: Guenther GA, Pollack SW, Stubbs BA, Skillman SM. Building and Sustaining Washington's Oral Health Workforce: Career Pathways for Dental Assistants, Dental Hygienists, and Dentists. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, December 2025.

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