

The Washington Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Spring 2026 Data Collection Planning

Washington State Nursing Workforce Research Group Quarterly Meeting
February 9, 2026

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University of Washington
Center for Health Workforce Studies



Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Partnership between

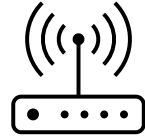
- Washington Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Board
- University of Washington Center for Health Workforce Studies

Funding provided by the Washington State Legislature

Employers and hiring managers surveyed once per year



Objectives



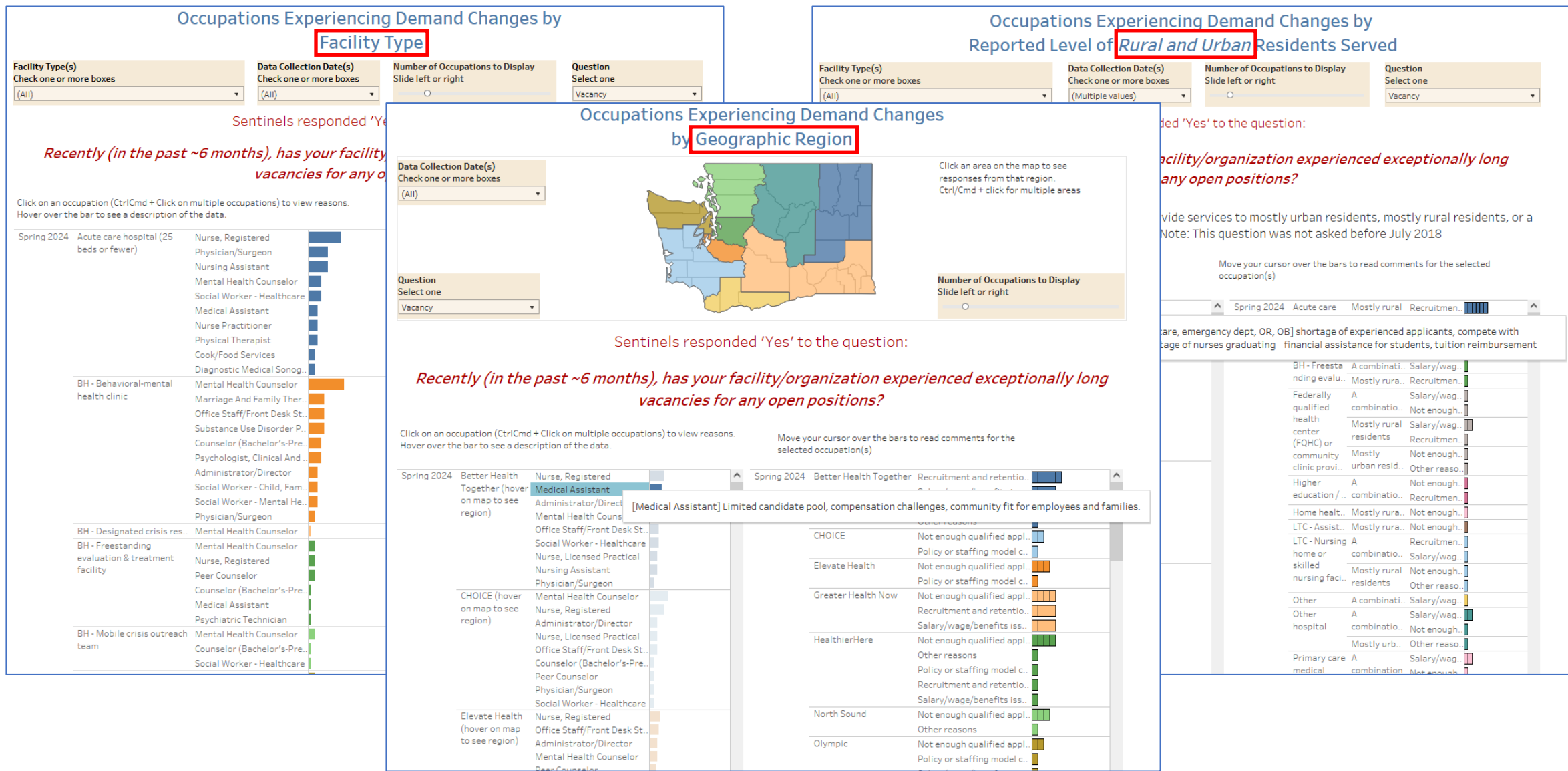
Signals describe the **how** and **why** behind health workforce needs



Inform solutions for employers, educators and policymakers

All Findings are Available on the Website

wa.sentinelnetwork.org



Findings briefs summarize responses for selected facility types



Spring 2021

Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Findings Brief:

Behavioral/Mental Health, Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Clinics and Residential Treatment Facilities

Behavioral/mental health, SUD and residential treatment facilities provided information about their workforce needs to the Washington State Health Workforce Sentinel Network, most recently in April/May 2021. This Findings Brief provides their response themes as well as examples of specific comments, with an emphasis on the most recent findings. Responses since 2016 may be viewed at www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/.

Behavioral health facilities' responses to pandemic-related questions are highlighted below. More pandemic-specific findings from earlier in the pandemic are at www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19/.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reported by Behavioral Health facilities: Themes and examples

In the past 6 months, have there been overall staffing changes at your facility due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
THEMES: Responses split evenly between those with extra staffing challenges due to COVID and those without.

- We lost several clinicians for childcare and health reasons at the start of COVID. We've had lots of absences due to quarantine/isolation. The state's Paid Family Medical Leave Act has caused us a HUGE problem. There is no incentive to return to work as they can take PMLA and then go on unemployment.
- Need for more resources in mental health due to COVID-19 impact.
- COVID is probably not the biggest factor leading to workforce challenges. Instead, I believe our issue is that of having a limited recruitment pool in our rural area.

What about the staffing arrangements at your facility made it easier/harder to respond to the pandemic?

- Telehealth initially made it easier, but our staff is much happier now that we are back in-person, present in the clinics.
- This switch [to telehealth] did make us more accessible to clients in a way we hadn't been before.
- What made it harder was safety. We had to eliminate or limit staff traveling from one facility to another, helping out at other facilities and that type of limitation to ensure patient and staff safety.
- We did close our day center for a number of months. We found it impossible to keep clients 6 ft. apart.

Describe the workforce impact, if any, of the use of telehealth at your facility over the past 6 months.

THEMES: Telehealth was useful for some patient populations, but many are eager to get back to in-person treatment.

- In the beginning this was great for many clients and still is, but now during the last six months many clients are tired of telehealth and want face to face appointments.
- It has brought therapy to patients that normally would not be able to receive therapy.
- With our population (serious and complex issues) it's just not sufficient at all for practical reasons (most clients do not have a computer or internet access - only phone if that) and many have hesitations about technology.

Did your organization do anything to encourage your staff to receive the COVID-19 vaccine? If so, what strategies were or were not successful?

THEMES: Education and incentives were common. Vaccination rates for staff varied.

- We provided fairly intense education about the risks and benefits. About 90% of our staff chose to get the vaccine.
- We have left the decision up each staff-we will not force the staff to get vaccinated if they do not wish to.
- We offered a one day floating holiday to be used at time of choice and \$100. We also had presentations from the health district to address fears. Yet we are only 55% vaccinated at this current time.
- It seemed that those who planned to be vaccinated jumped in right away, and those who were initially reluctant, remain reluctant. We may come up with some kind of reinforcement for those vaccinated, but have not yet decided.

What are your top workforce needs that could be alleviated by policy, regulatory, and/or payment changes?

THEMES: Low wages could be addressed by higher Medicaid reimbursement rates.

- Medicaid reimbursement rates to support staff needed to adequately provides treatment services.
- Licensure reciprocity in WA State.
- Shortage of masters-level clinicians. Loan reimbursement, ability to pay higher wages and reduction in supervision requirements are all possible solutions.

Behavioral Health Facilities (Spring 2021)

Between 2016 and 2021, over the course of 10 reporting periods, behavioral health* and other health care facilities in Washington provided key, on-the-ground information to the Washington State Health Workforce Sentinel Network. Below are highlights of trends over time and recent findings. More findings from behavioral/mental health, SUD and residential treatment facilities, along with those from other health care facilities, are at wa.sentinelnetwork.org.

Behavioral Health Facilities* - Occupations with exceptionally long vacancies: 2016-2021

Top occupations cited as having exceptionally long vacancies by date of reporting								
Rank	Spring 2017	Fall 2017	Summer 2018	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021
1	Mental health counselor	Chemical dependency professional	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor	Mental health counselor
2	Chemical dependency professional	Mental health counselor	Chemical dependency professional Peer counselor	Chemical dependency professional	Chemical dependency professional	Chemical dependency professional	Chemical dependency professional (SUDP)***	Substance use disorder professional***
3	Social worker	Social worker Nurse practitioner	Nurse practitioner	Social worker	Peer counselor	Social worker	Social worker (Mental Health/SUDP)	Psychiatrist Social worker
4	Nurse practitioner	Peer counselor	Social worker Psychiatrist	Marriage & family therapist	Marriage & family therapist	Peer counselor	Registered nurse	Peer counselor
5	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Marriage & family therapist	Peer counselor Psychiatrist	Social worker	Multiple occupations cited at same frequency	Marriage & family therapist Peer counselor Psychiatrist	Registered nurse

↑ Most cited

*Behavioral/mental health, substance use disorder clinics and residential treatment facilities

**Summer and Winter 2016 findings not shown due to space constraints

***Occupation title changed to Substance Use Disorder Professional (SUDP) in 2019

Reasons for vacancies reported by Behavioral Health facilities

Most vacancy issues were related to salary demands or applicant qualifications.

- [Multiple occupations] Integrated care has created competition for these positions with agencies that can afford to pay at higher rates because of the difference in reimbursement for services.
- [Multiple occupations] Frequently, as soon as clinicians/therapists meet licensure requirements, they leave for a position in a hospital, clinic or private practice where wages are higher and documentation requirements are lower.
- Ongoing turn-over with our Psychiatric aides (we use Certified Nursing Assistants whenever we can) and very limited application pool. McDonalds has a starting salary higher (\$15/hr.) than we can pay.
- Many SUDP/Ts salary/wage expectations are above what the agency can pay due to low Medicaid rates.
- [Chemical dependency professionals/Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors] Finding that applicants are not proficient in writing treatment plans.
- Finding an SUDP with a Masters degree is like finding a unicorn. Please make this an easier process.

Data Collection Planning – Spring 2026

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The Questionnaire Casts a Wide Net

Facility Types

Over 30 facility types across many health care settings (hospitals, long term care, behavioral health, community health, home health, ambulatory care, oral health and more)

Occupations

Over 80 occupations representing the complete spectrum of educational preparation

Geography

All areas of the state, with an attempt to capture responses from organizations primarily serving rural patients/clients



Sentinel Network workforce demand questions

In the past year:

- Occupations experiencing exceptionally long **vacancies**
 - Occupations experiencing **turnover**
 - **Overarching question** about topics of current interest
 - **Sector-specific modules** to dive deeper into sector-specific needs
 - 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**

Overarching questions (1) – examples from Spring 2025

Questions About Your Organization as a Whole

1. Currently, what are your organization's top workforce issues?

Select all that apply. For each selection, describe why this is an issue, any actions taken and outcomes to-date

- Recruiting new workers / Filling vacancies
- Retaining current workers / Increasing worker satisfaction
- Clinical workforce reductions (e.g., layoffs, furloughs, hiring freeze)
- Non-clinical workforce reductions (e.g., layoffs, furloughs, hiring freeze)
- Other

2. In the past year, has your organization experienced any of the following hiring challenges? (Select all that apply)

- Delays in potential employees' ability to complete testing required for certification
- Delays in licensing for new employees or renewals for current employees
- Increases in degree requirements or other changes to hiring criteria
- Other hiring challenges related to applicant qualifications

Describe _____

- No significant hiring challenges related to applicant qualifications

If you experienced any of these challenges, please describe the effect on hiring, including which occupations were affected:

Overarching questions (2) – examples from Spring 2025

3. In the past year, has your organization supported “grow-your-own” programs (i.e., apprenticeships, residencies or on-the-job training opportunities) to train workers for specific roles?

[If Yes]: “Describe (e.g. which occupations were the focus of these programs, did you partner with educational institutions, and how successful were the efforts).”

[If No]: If no, has your organization explored these types of programs?

[if Yes]: What barriers have prevented implementation?

[If No, skip to next question]

4. To what extent have the following affected your ability to recruit and retain your workforce in the past year?

- **Childcare availability** (never/rarely, occasionally, frequently/always, not applicable)
- **Housing availability** (never/rarely, occasionally, frequently/always, not applicable)
- **Transportation options** (never/rarely, occasionally, frequently/always, not applicable)
- **Violence or aggression in the workplace** (never/rarely, occasionally, frequently/always, not applicable)

[For each of the above, if occasionally or frequently/always selected] Describe _____

Suggested topics for Spring 2026

Testing delays and licensing/credentialing challenges

- Describe the challenges and workforce impact

Clinical placement

- Ability to support, barriers, facilitators

Managing uncertainty and planning for the future

Retention and turnover strategies

Recruitment strategies

Alternative training and education programs

Pipeline development and early-career support

Artificial intelligence and technology

- What have they tried and what have been the results

Which of these topics, if any, are of high importance?

What additional topics would you like to see healthcare employers address?

Sector-Specific Modules for Spring 2026

Long-term care facilities

Organizations that employ peer counselors

 **Organizations that provide primary care services**

*Want questions that don't match those discussed on the previous slide

Primary Care Facilities – Suggested Topics

Staffing effects on the ability to provide high-quality care

Employee well-being strategies

Any layoffs/downsizing? What have been the effects?

Are new hires adequately prepared?

Anticipated effects if Medicaid funding changes

Changes in patient population and effects on the workforce

Which of these topics, if any, are of high importance?

What additional topics would you like to see healthcare employers address?

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