The Washington Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Findings from Primary Care Organizations

Workforce Council Meeting
September 24, 2026

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Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Board

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Sentinel Network Team

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Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Tool to allow **employers** to share their **health workforce needs**

Statewide

All sectors

Apr 6 – May 3

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Spring 2026 Questionnaire

Question Topics

- Occupations experiencing vacancies/turnover
- Strategies for navigating change
- Early-career development strategies
- Integration of new technologies

Modules

- Primary care
- Long-term care
- Behavioral health

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Findings from Primary Care Organizations

Spring 2026

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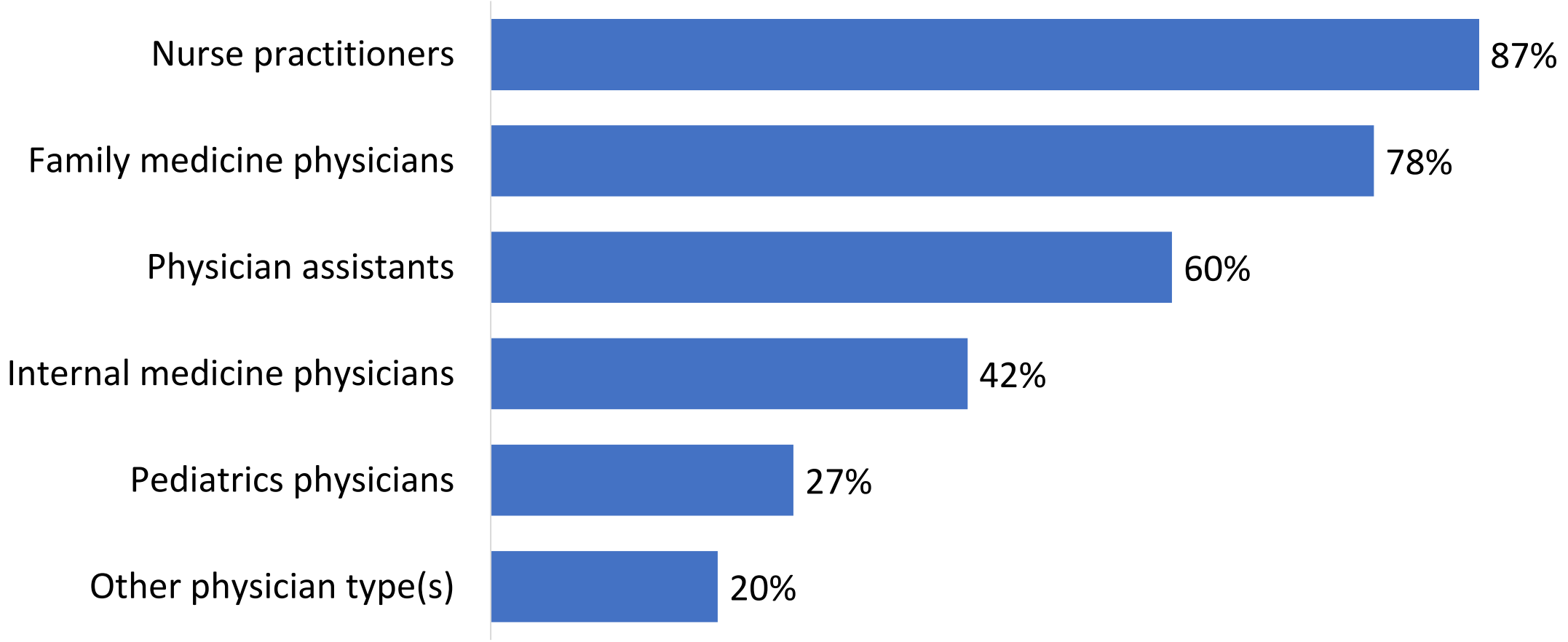
Facility Types Employing Primary Care Physicians, NPs and/or PAs

45 respondents said they employ physicians, nurse practitioners and/or physician assistants* to provide primary care services. Respondents represented a variety of facility types:

- Acute care hospital (25 beds or fewer)
- Acute care hospital (more than 25 beds)
- BH - Behavioral health agency - WA DOH certified
- BH - Behavioral health clinic or practice
- BH - Psychiatric/substance use treatment hospital or psychiatric unit in a hospital
- BH - Substance use disorder residential treatment facility
- Public health organization
- Federally qualified health center (FQHC) or community clinic providing care free or on sliding fee scale
- LTC - Assisted living facility
- LTC - Other nursing/personal care facility
- Primary care medical clinic (not FQHC/community clinic or rural health clinic)
- Rural health clinic
- Specialty medical clinic

**While other occupations my be involved in providing primary care services, the Spring 2026 questionnaire focused on recruitment and retention challenges for physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants.*

Among Sentinel Network Respondents (n = 45)
Which Occupations Are Employed to Provide Primary Care?

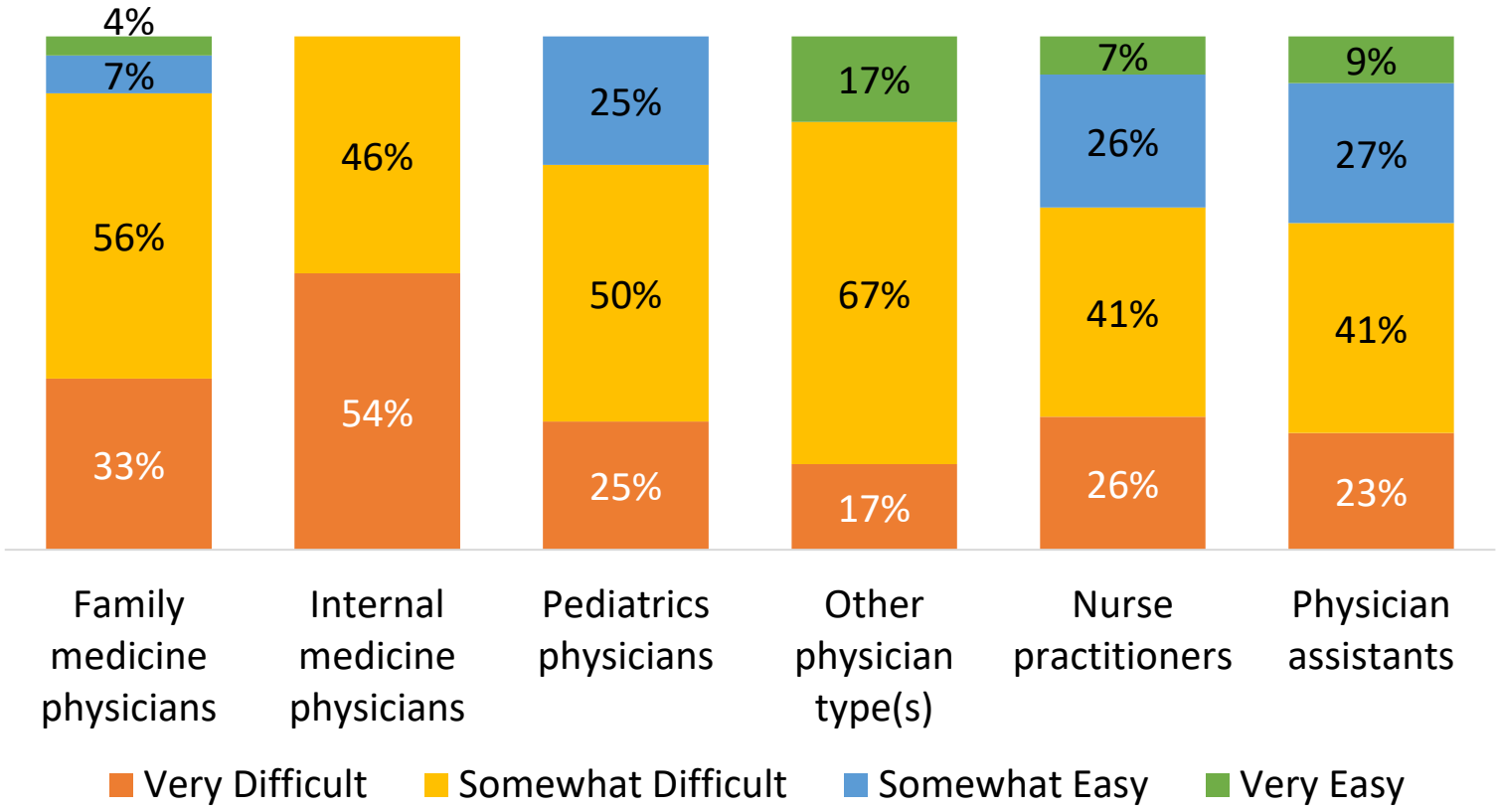


**While other occupations my be involved in providing primary care services, the Spring 2026 questionnaire focused on recruitment and retention challenges for physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants.*

Recruitment for Primary Care Roles

Respondents report that **recruitment** of most primary care provider types is challenging, with nurse practitioners and physician assistants reported to be somewhat less challenging

For each provider type you employ, rate your organization's ability to recruit staff in the past year



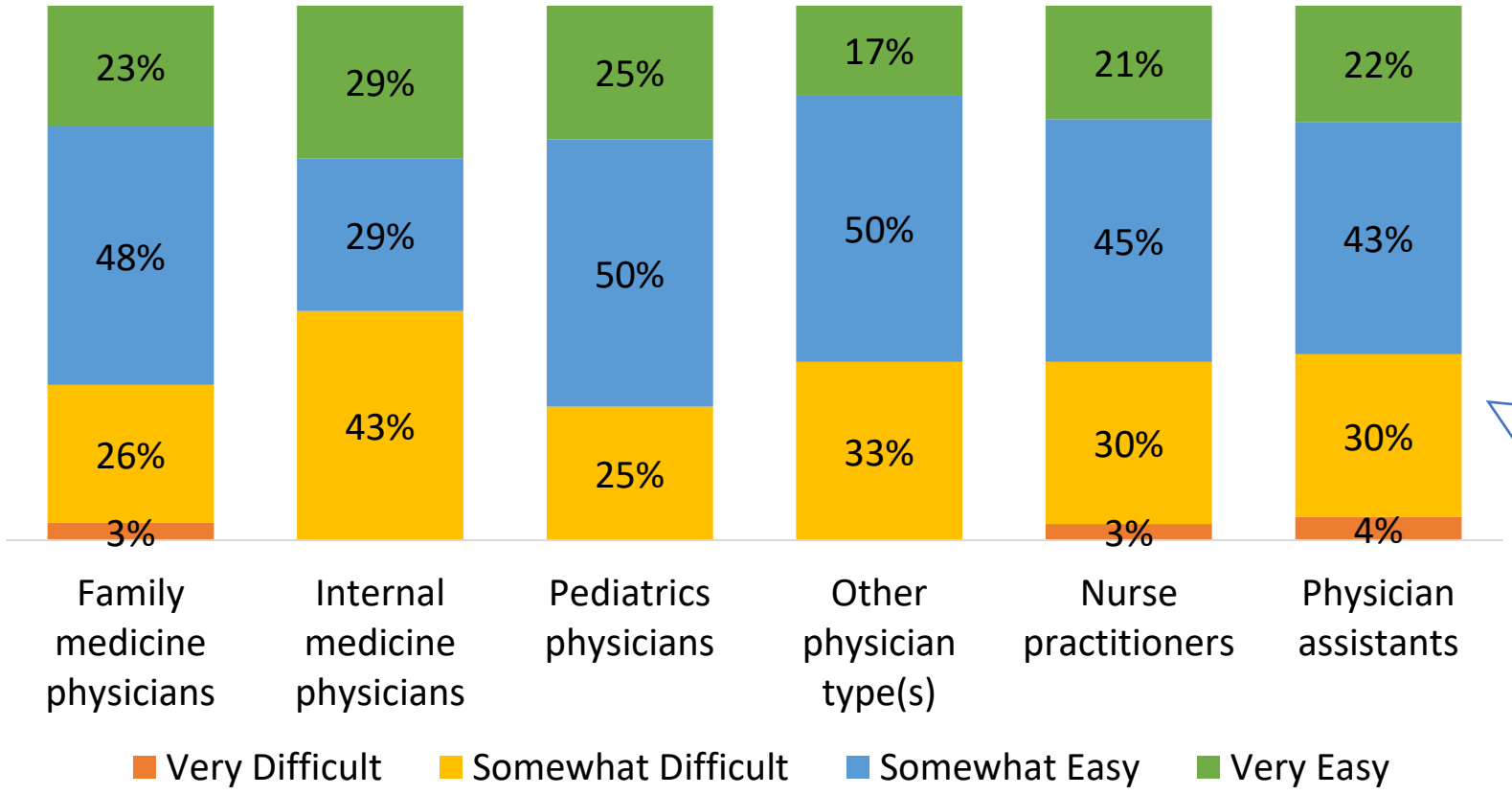
*"**Recruitment for primary care physicians is challenging** due to a limited national supply, which creates intense competition among healthcare organizations for a small pool of qualified candidates."*
- FQHC/Community Clinic

*"The recruiting takes a while and we often source outside help in those efforts **but [it] has not been a large struggle.** Our clinics are great to advertise the slower pace from larger areas, which resonates well with those licenses."*
– Rural Health Clinic

Retention for Primary Care Roles

Staff retention is reported to be less challenging than recruitment

For each provider type you employ, rate your organization's ability to <u>retain</u> staff in the past year



*"It is not easy to retain but **we have been successful by educating our providers regarding budget constraints and providing transparency on productivity.** We also work hard to create opportunities for flexibility in schedule templates and work schedules."*
– FQHC/Community Clinic

*"FQHCs are sometimes attractive options for newer grad NPs. As a result, **there is typically a higher turnover rate when the student loan repayment programs are exhausted.**"*
– FQHC/Community Clinic

Reasons for Leaving

What are the most common reasons physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants give when leaving your organization (or primary care more broadly)?

- Compensation
- Workload and burnout
- Pursuit of new or better opportunities
- Personal factors (relocation, family needs, and retirement)

"They say they are burned out, or the grass looks greener on the other side. ***Most who come here are in their first job out of residency****… Those who come here from at least one prior job tend to stay."*
- FQHC / Community Clinic

"Most are leaving for different opportunities. ***When they work for a large organization, it is sometimes just a job and they can stay for their contract and then jump to another organization for a new sign on bonus.*** *Work life balance is hard for all people in healthcare. Organizations should focus on retention just as much as they focus on recruitment and this is not generally the case."* - Rural health clinic

Retention Strategies

Have you identified effective strategies for improving retention of these occupations?

Two-thirds of respondents indicated that they have not identified effective strategies

Among the rest, effective strategies included:

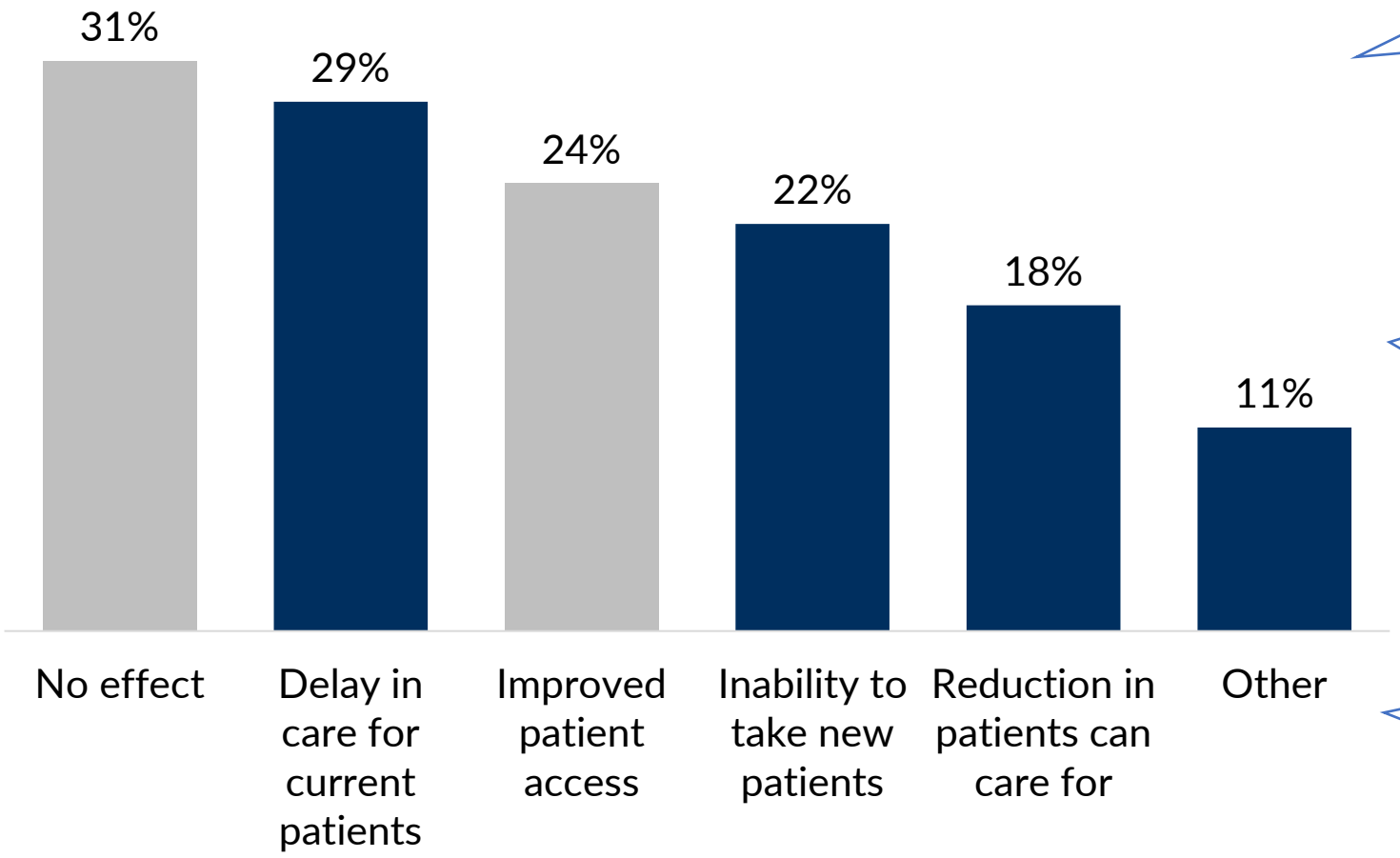
- Increased autonomy
- Work-life balance
- Flexible scheduling
- Compensation

*"Our provider retention strategies are focused on fostering **long-term engagement, professional satisfaction, and organizational alignment**. Key approaches include offering competitive and equitable compensation, promoting work-life balance through flexible scheduling and supported administrative time, and providing opportunities for professional growth and leadership development.'*
- FQHC / Community Clinic

*"We have **longer appointment times, more flexibility and autonomy**, higher patient satisfaction."*
- FQHC/Community Clinic

Effects of Staffing Levels

Which statement(s) best describes how your organization's primary care staffing has affected your ability to respond to patient/client demand during the past year? (check all that apply)



"Longer wait times for care. Can't take on new clients."
– Rural health clinic

"Due to lack of appropriate funding, it is possible that clinic is closed or appointments are rescheduled due to provider shortage."
– Public health organization

"We want to expand hours/days of service but need new providers to do so."
– Acute care hospital (25 beds or fewer)

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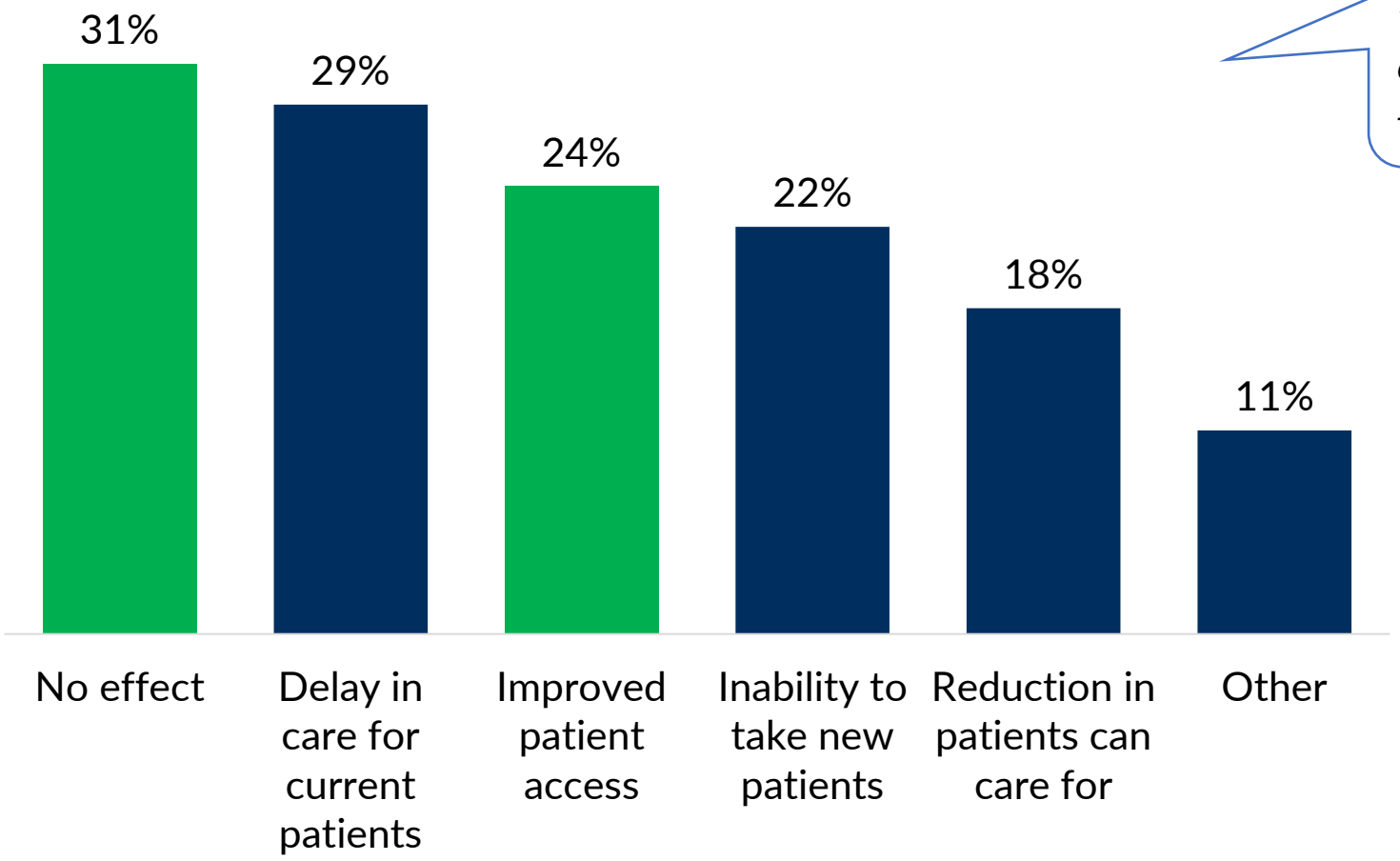

"We send less patients to the emergency department."
– Behavioral health agency - WA DOH certified

"We are currently accepting new patients."
– Primary care medical clinic

Summary

- **A wide range a settings** employ physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants to provide primary care services.
- Sentinel Network respondents reported employing primarily **nurse practitioners, family medicine physicians, and physician assistants** for primary care roles.
- Respondents generally reported that **recruitment was more difficult than retention**. Recruitment was **especially difficult for physician roles**.
- When asked if their organization had identified **effective retention strategies**, two-thirds of respondents said no. But more detailed responses revealed strategies such as a focus on work-life balance, flexible scheduling and increased compensation.
- **Some respondents cited negative consequences related to primary care staffing levels** including delays in care or an inability to accept new patients.
- However, other respondents cited neutral or even positive outcomes, indicating that **some organizations are successfully navigating primary care staffing challenges.**

Thank you!

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wa.sentinelnetwork.org

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