

Crisis in Care

How California's Healthcare Worker Shortage is Affecting Workers and Patient Care

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MAY 2022

While most people think of doctors and nurses when they hear the term “healthcare worker,” allied healthcare workers — medical assistants, respiratory therapists, lab assistants, housekeepers, and others — make up more than 60% of healthcare workers in California.¹ Without their vital contributions, our hospitals would grind to a halt and patients would be unable to get the care they need.

Even before the pandemic, California faced a massive shortage of allied healthcare workers to care for our aging

population — as many as 65,000 workers annually according to conservative estimates.² The stress and toll of fighting the pandemic has led many to leave the industry, creating a full-blown healthcare staffing and patient care crisis.

SEIU-UHW members believe a critical first step to confronting this crisis is to understand the extent of the shortage and its impact, as seen by those closest to it: frontline healthcare workers.

Crisis in Care presents the results of a six-week survey

of 33,140 allied healthcare workers from nearly 200 medical facilities across California.

The survey was conducted by SEIU-United Healthcare Workers West from March 14 through April 22, 2022.

The results expose in alarming detail California's healthcare staffing crisis and its devastating impact on working conditions and patient care, and the failure of employers and government to adequately address worker shortages.

¹ California Competes. Meeting California's Demand for Allied Health Workers (2021), p. 3, https://californiacompetes.org/assets/general-files/CA-Competes-Allied-Health_Final.pdf

² Ibid.

Key Findings

Widespread understaffing — 83% of healthcare workers report that their departments are either severely understaffed or somewhat understaffed.

Delays in care — 65% have seen or heard of care being delayed or denied as a result of short staffing.

Inadequate time for care — 74% always, frequently, or sometimes lack proper time to care for patients.

Skipping safety protocols — 41% feel pressured to ignore or skip safety protocols because of short staffing.

Skipping breaks or meals — 46% always, frequently, or sometimes feel forced to skip breaks or meals.

Unfilled staff positions — 38% report that vacant positions in their departments take more than seven months to fill or are never filled.

Hesitant to recommend care at their facility — 48% would definitely not take their own family to get care at their facility, would be hesitant to do so, or would only do so if there were no other care options.

Raised concerns with management — 54% have raised short-staffing concerns with management.

Recommendations

Given the urgency of California's crisis in healthcare staffing and patient care, SEIU-UHW members call on healthcare providers and elected leaders to work together with frontline healthcare workers to develop solutions through collective bargaining, regulatory action, and legislation:

1. Fill healthcare jobs now and into the future

- Increase staffing by 10% a year for three years to meet patient demand.
- Fix broken hiring processes and ensure jobs are posted and filled.
- Diversify the workforce at all levels and ensure workers can advance internally.
- Create a pipeline of 200,000 new healthcare workers a year for the next three years to fill healthcare jobs into the future.

2. Value and properly compensate frontline healthcare workers

- Increase base wages for all workers, including establishing a \$25/hour healthcare worker minimum wage.
- Provide annual raises tied to cost of living.
- Create and maintain benefits packages that will help recruit and retain the healthcare workforce.

3. Ensure healthcare workers are safe and supported on the job

- Strengthen safety precautions and protocols.
- Ensure workers can take time off.
- Dramatically increase mental health support and emotional wellness resources for caregivers.