



February 26, 2021

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT Health Worker Shortages

PRO POINTS

- **Hospitals, nursing homes and other health providers** continue to face coronavirus-related staffing shortages, even after the peak of the pandemic's winter wave.
- **Out-of-state volunteers are playing less of a role** filling gaps in the health care workforce compared with the beginning of the pandemic, in part because later virus waves have been more widespread.
- **Industry leaders say prioritizing vaccination for health workers** should reduce the strain, with fewer workers out sick or in quarantine.
- **Medical school enrollment has surged in the past year**, but a shortage of medical residency slots could continue to be a bottleneck for new doctors and nurses in the longer term.

HOW WE GOT HERE

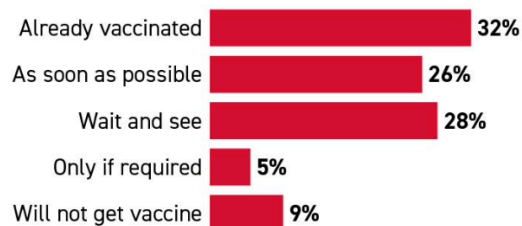
During each surge of Covid-19 cases and hospitalizations, health care providers have faced staff shortages due to the sheer volume of patients, particularly in specialty and frontline positions like ICU nurses.

Shortages in early hot spots like New York City spurred a nationwide call for volunteers, and many providers coped by hiring temporary traveling staff. But once the virus was more widespread across dozens of states, hospitals were increasingly forced to pause elective procedures and retrain local staff to manage the load.

Staffing has been further strained because large swaths of the workforce have been out sick with Covid-19 or forced to quarantine. Health care workers were given first priority for vaccine administration, and early data suggests the effort has reduced cases among staff. But vaccine uptake has been uneven across facilities, and roughly 3-in-10 health workers want to wait and see how it's working before volunteering themselves, according to polling by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Many health care workers are still vaccine hesitant

When health care workers plan to get vaccinated



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation, "Covid-19 vaccine monitor: January 2021"



WHAT'S NEXT

On his second day in office, President Joe Biden signed an executive order calling on the HHS secretary to issue recommendations for increasing health workforce capacity, including investments to support Covid-19 patients with long-term health effects.

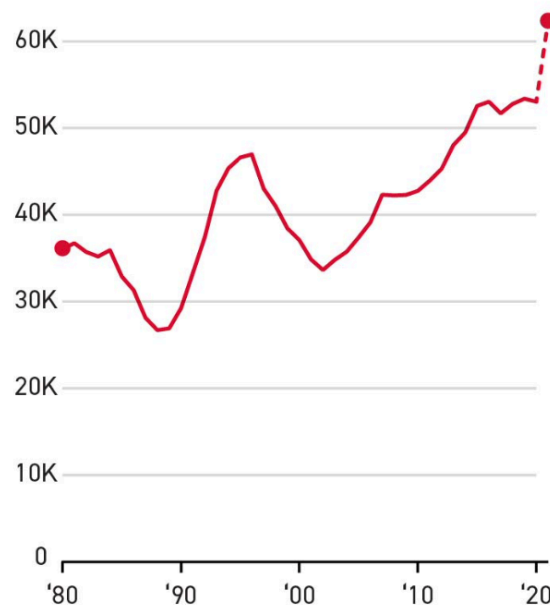
Immigration advocates are also hoping that Biden will expand visas for overseas nurses and reduce restrictions on immigrant doctors already in the country. However, the administration's recently unveiled comprehensive immigration bill does not include targeted provisions to expand the medical workforce.

In the longer term, some industry observers have predicted that a "Fauci effect" will inspire more students to enter medical and public health fields — a reference to the celebrity status of Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert. Bank of America and Customers Bank say that more than 90 percent of their loan volume has gone to employers with fewer than 20 workers.

Applications to U.S. medical schools rose by 18 percent in the most recent cycle, although law school applications have seen a similar surge. A recent report by the Association of American Medical Colleges warns that medical residency slots have not kept pace with the growth and could prove to be a bottleneck, citing the cap on Medicare funding for residencies.

Medical school applications are surging amid pandemic

Applicants to U.S. medical schools, by year



Source: Association of American Medical Colleges
Note: Figure for the most recent year is preliminary



POWER PLAYERS

- **Xavier Becerra:** The California attorney general is Biden's pick to lead HHS, which is responsible for unwinding Trump-era health rules and containing the coronavirus.
- **Health Resources and Services Administration:** This agency within HHS officially designates health workforce shortages for geographic areas, populations or facilities.
- **Association of American Medical Colleges:** Members include all accredited U.S. and Canadian medical schools and approximately 400 teaching hospitals and health systems, including VA medical centers.
- **Federation of State Medical Boards:** Represents the 70 state medical and osteopathic boards nationwide and provides access to an interstate license database.