



ON the MEND:

Progress and Pain Points for
Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

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MASSACHUSETTS
Health & Hospital
ASSOCIATION

On the Mend: Progress and Pain Points for Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

Massachusetts hospitals and health systems have helped cement the state's status as the [top-ranked healthcare system in the nation](#), due in large part to the *people* who deliver and oversee care for the commonwealth's seven million residents. In doing so, they have been a major driver of the state's economy over the past five years, adding approximately 10,000 well-paying, challenging, and rewarding jobs, primarily in caregiving positions.

Following the [Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association's \(MHA's\) 2022 report](#) identifying 19,000 vacancies in key roles at hospitals across the state, focused recruitment, hiring, and retention efforts have reduced that number to 13,600.

Nursing roles saw the most improvement, with five of the top 10 vacancy rate reductions occurring in nursing positions. One in every 10 nursing roles are now vacant, compared to a 15% vacancy rate in 2022.

Workforce vacancies lead to especially painful ripple effects when it comes to the 24/7 delivery of healthcare. Vacancies limit the number of beds available to patients in need, drive up wait times, worsen the strains on existing caregivers, and ultimately increase overall costs for the system at-large.

Despite progress in reducing workforce shortages, critical gaps remain in roles such as sitters, community health workers, and various technician positions, many with vacancy rates exceeding 20%. Behavioral health and advanced practice roles also continue to face high turnover and staffing shortages.

On the Mend: Progress and Pressure Points for Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce provides a comprehensive overview of the recent progress and ongoing challenges in meeting the workforce demands of the local healthcare system.

The data presented is derived from a survey sent to hospitals in early 2025 requesting information on 56 positions. The median statewide vacancy rate for those roles was 14.2% in 2024.

It is worth noting that, concurrently with the uptick in hiring, certain, largely non-clinical roles have faced layoffs due to the financial pressures besetting the entire healthcare ecosystem in the commonwealth. Based on MHA's data, the reduction in vacancy rates for *key surveyed positions* (the vast majority of which are clinical or patient-facing) was primarily the result of new hires in those areas.

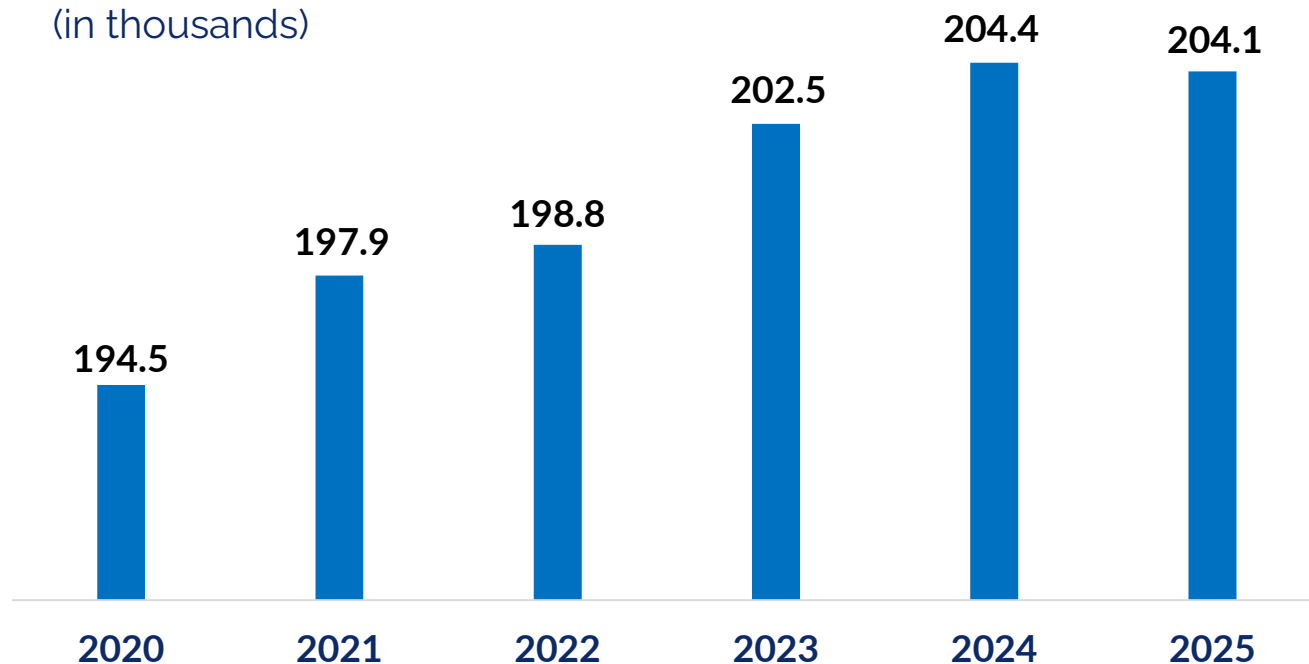
MHA, its members, and the state have launched extensive initiatives to grow the Massachusetts healthcare workforce. Those efforts are making a clear difference. Moving forward, additional legislative action and targeted investments are needed to sustain momentum, close remaining gaps, and ultimately expand care access for patients.

Growth in the Massachusetts Hospital Workforce

2020-2025

Number of Massachusetts Hospital Jobs

(in thousands)



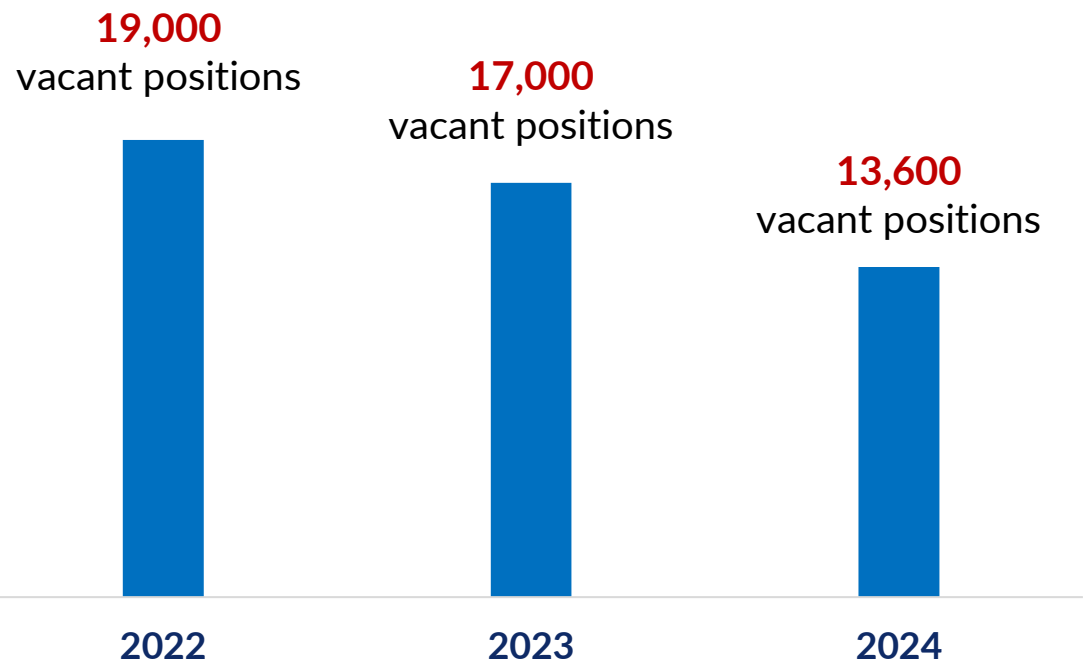
Source: BLS; Figure is averaged for the entire year based on available data

Hospitals are a major source of stable, well-paying jobs and are expanding their hiring to meet the ever-rising need for care. Hospitals are among the largest employers in their service areas and drive local economies by supporting ancillary jobs and generating local spending. **Since 2020, Massachusetts hospitals have added 10,000 workers, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.**

This growth has occurred within a highly challenging financial landscape – both for the healthcare community and other sectors. Hospitals have added jobs in key patient care positions even while other segments of the economy have been forced to scale back on core staff.

Aggregate Vacancies Across Massachusetts Hospitals: Key Roles

2022-2024

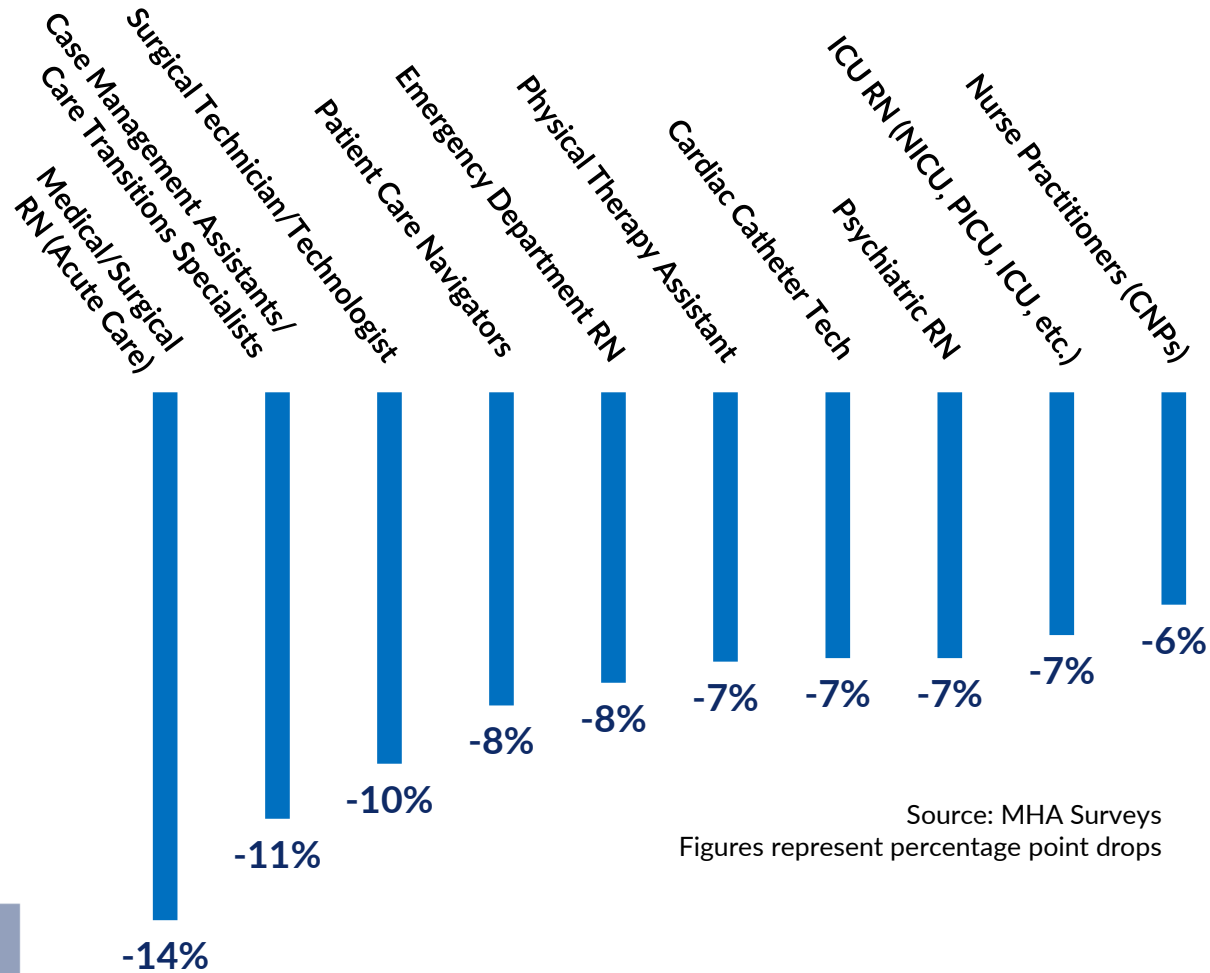


Source: MHA Surveys

This hiring has not only stimulated the Massachusetts economy; it is helping address the critical shortage of healthcare workers.

In 2022, an [MHA survey](#) found that there were 19,000 unfilled hospital positions among key, predominately patient-facing roles. Those vacancies result in care delays and reduced access to services, as well as clinician burnout and increased costs as systems are forced to hire expensive temporary labor to meet demand.

Concerted efforts by hospitals, their partners, and state government since that landmark MHA report have resulted in the vacancy rate decreasing from 19,000 open positions to 13,600 in 2024.



Source: MHA Surveys
Figures represent percentage point drops

Largest Declines in Vacancy Rates 2023-2024

MHA's latest survey shows the top 10 patient-facing roles where vacancies have been successfully filled since 2023.

Recruitment-and-retention efforts have focused especially on the nursing workforce, with five of the biggest declines in vacancy rates occurring in nursing roles.



AREAS of PROGRESS

Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

Areas of Progress: Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

Improvements in hiring are the direct result of targeted investments from providers, their partners, and state government.

Hospitals and health systems have created career ladder programs, partnered with higher education to create new training and pipeline programs, offered wrap-around supports (such as housing and childcare support) and higher salaries, while growing wellbeing initiatives among staff to make demanding healthcare jobs more supportive and rewarding. The state has also taken extensive action. Elected leaders have appropriated funding for the behavioral health workforce, joined 42 other states and jurisdictions in adopting the Nurse Licensure Compact, offered free community college, and scaled up local job training programs, among other efforts directed at building the healthcare workforce.

Through MHA, hospitals and health systems are also uniting around statewide initiatives to support and grow their talent.

Statewide Workforce Efforts:

SAFETY & VIOLENCE PREVENTION

- › Championing [comprehensive workplace violence legislation](#) in partnership with the state's largest healthcare unions (Massachusetts Nurses Association and 1199SEIU).
- › Data collection, reporting, and [comprehensive guidelines](#).
- › Annual summits, workgroups, and best-practice sharing.

RECRUITMENT



[Find Your Place in Healthcare](#) campaign features job boards, information about high-need roles, career support resources, and video testimonials from 60-plus local workers.

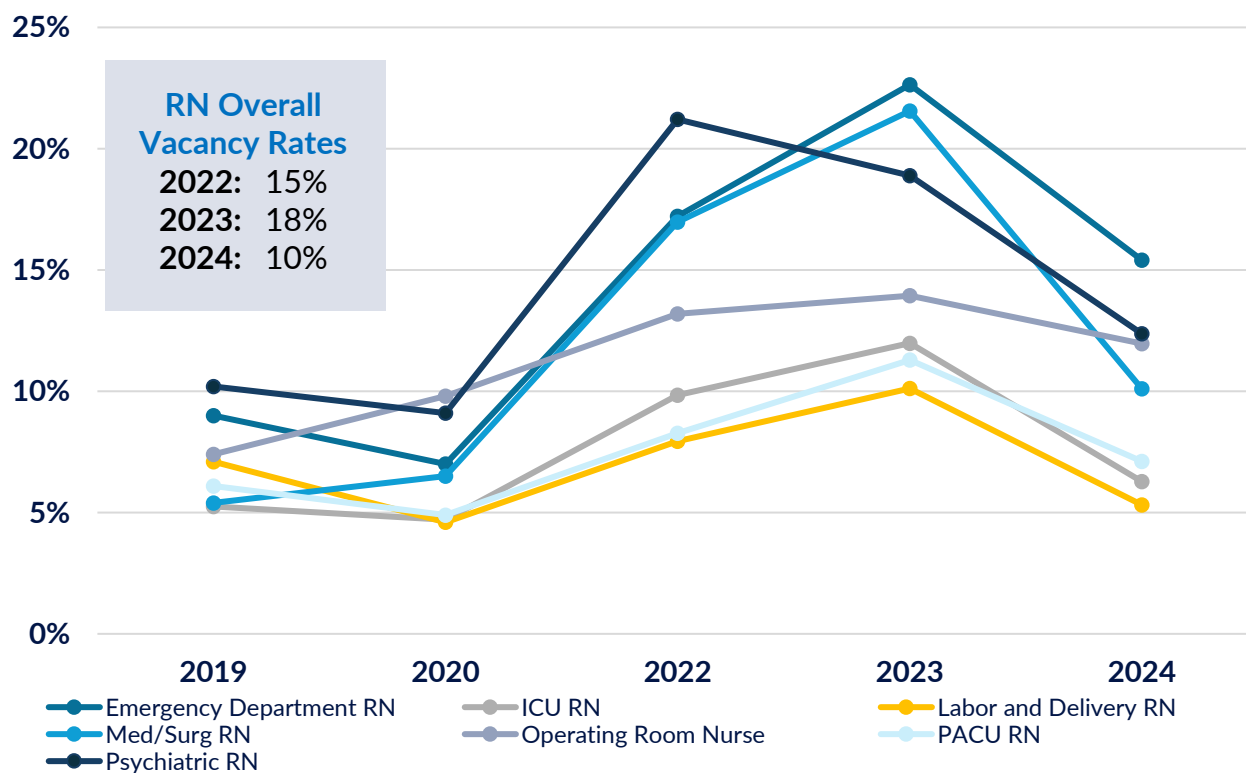
FIRST IN THE NATION

- › Statewide [Healthy Work Environment academy](#) that places frontline nurses at the center of problem-solving.
- › [Removal of potentially stigmatizing questions](#) from credentialing forms.

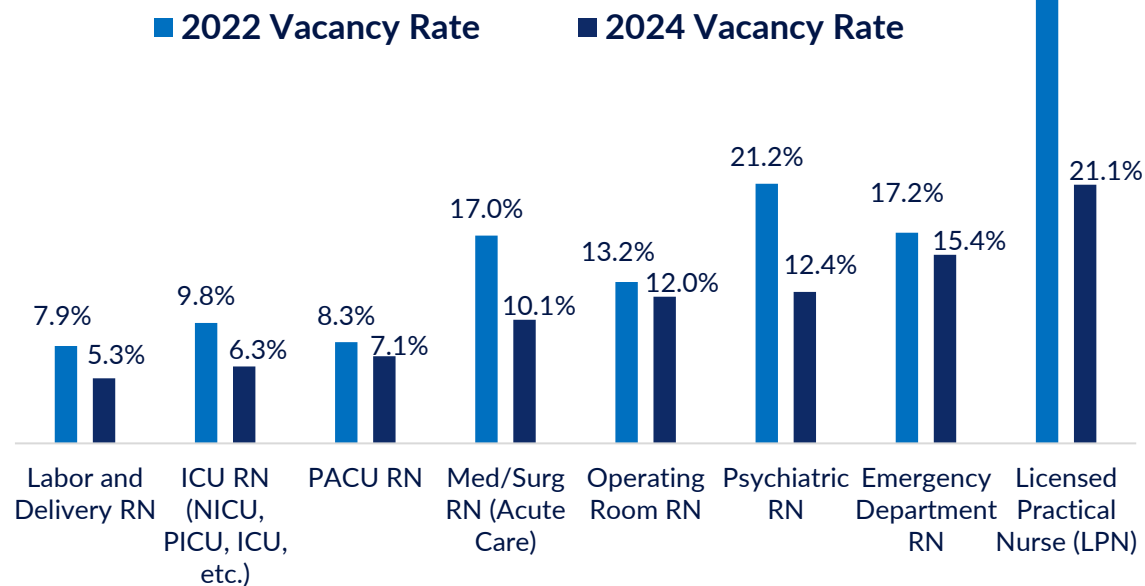
Areas of Progress: Nursing Vacancy Rates

Hospitals' hiring efforts have naturally focused on a central component of the caregiving team – the nursing workforce. Vacancy rates have declined across nursing areas, with the most significant declines seen in licensed practical nurses (LPNs), psychiatric nurses, and medical-surgical nurses. Despite the gains, double-digit vacancy rates remain high for nurses who are critical to patient care (including LPNs).

RN Vacancy Trends: 2019-2024



RN Vacancy Rates: 2022 vs. 2024



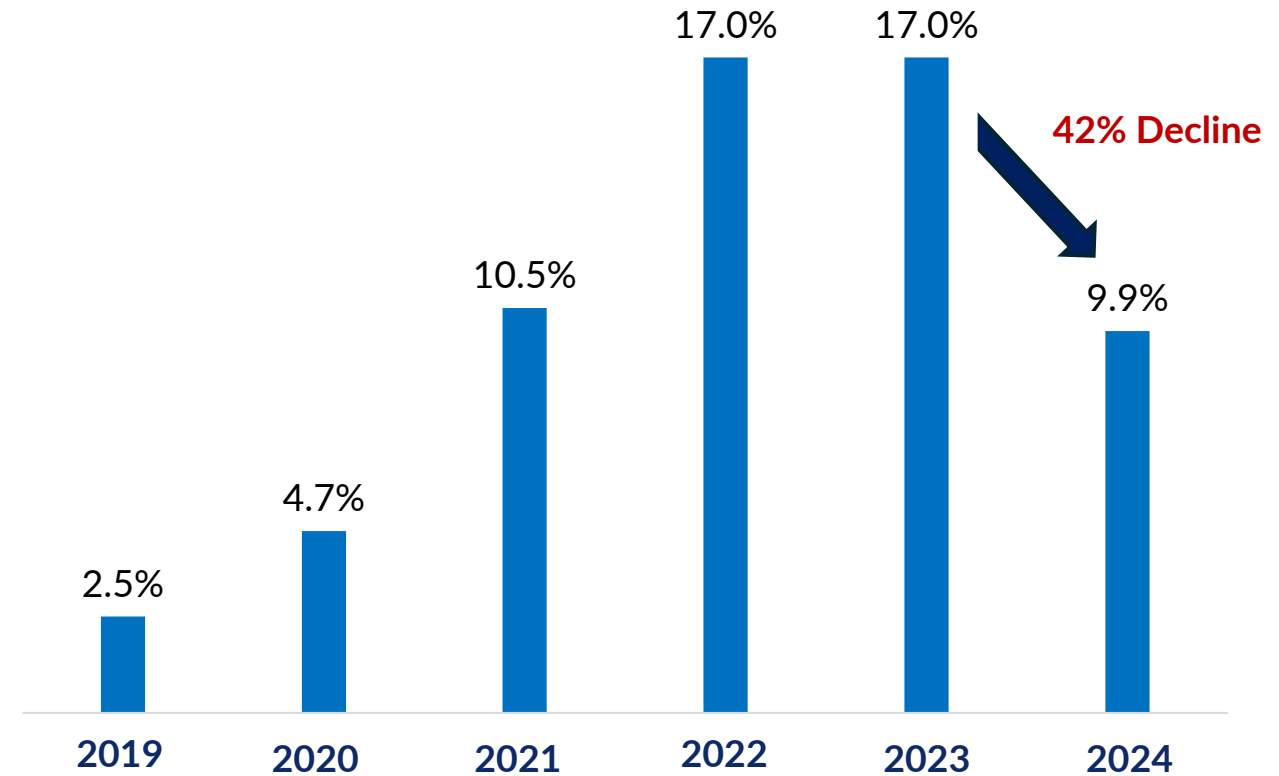
Source: MHA Surveys

Areas of Progress: Temporary Labor

As the pandemic destabilized the healthcare workforce, hospitals had to rely on high-cost temporary staffing through “traveler agencies” to fill critical positions. The average hourly wage rates for travel nurses far exceed the rates paid pre-pandemic – oftentimes doubling or even tripling. This added enormous costs to the healthcare system and accelerated providers’ financial losses.

MHA’s recent survey shows the percentage of hours worked by temporary nurses declined 42% between 2023 and 2024. However, despite the sharp decline, the need for traveler/agency labor is still four times higher than pre-pandemic 2019 levels.

Median Percentage of RN Hours by Travelers/Agency

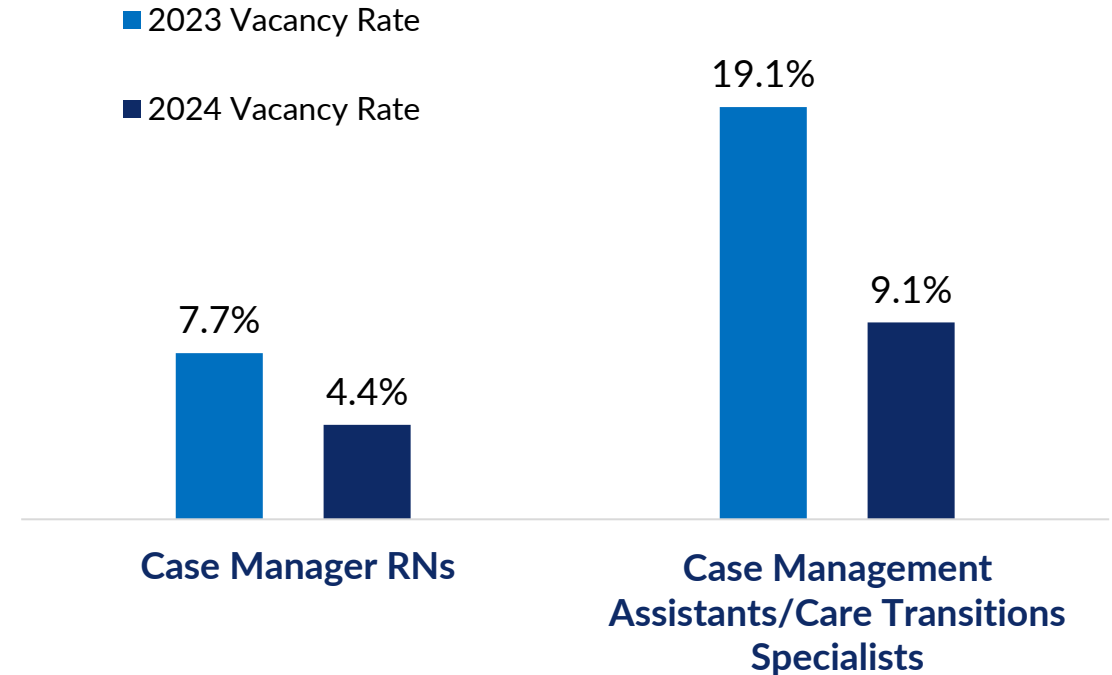


Source: MHA Surveys

Areas of Progress: Transitions of Care

Hospital case managers are a central link for patients, families, insurers, and all parts of the care continuum to ensure patients transition efficiently from the hospital to other medical settings – such as nursing facilities, long-term rehabilitation, or home care. **Hospitals have made significant strides in hiring nurse care managers and case management assistants/care transition specialists with the goal of easing patient transitions and freeing up beds for others in need of acute-level care.**

Yet despite these hospital-led advances, and due in many cases to administrative burdens caused by health insurance practices, guardianship obstacles, and transportation shortages, as many as 2,000 patients are still “stuck” in hospitals awaiting discharge. It remains a pressing patient care issue that requires additional interventions outside of hospital walls.



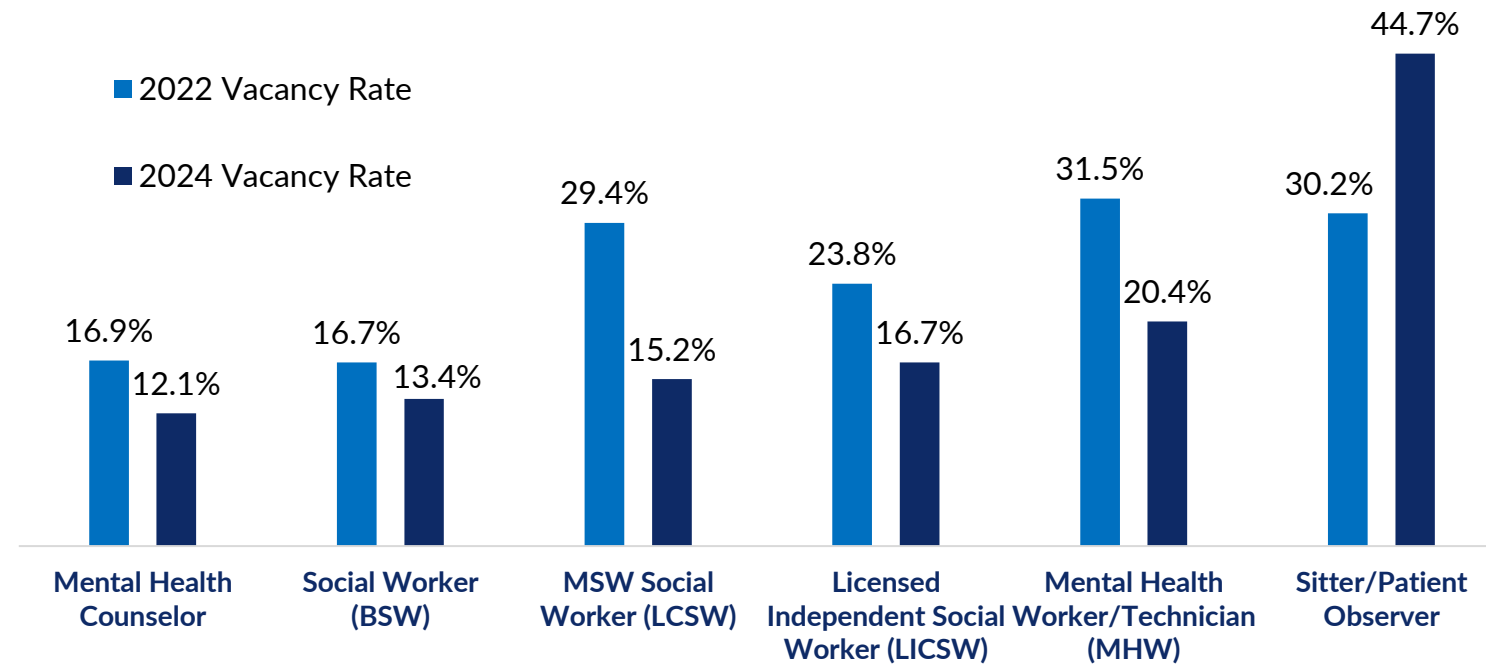
Source: MHA Surveys
Case manager data not collected in 2022

Areas of Progress: Behavioral Health

Through focused efforts by healthcare providers and the state, including \$100 million dedicated by the legislature for behavioral health loan forgiveness and other administration workforce initiatives, vacancy rates for behavioral health roles have declined significantly since 2022.

However, vacancy rates remain high for social workers, mental health workers/technicians, and sitters.

Low reimbursement rates for behavioral health result in comparatively lower salaries for social workers and related professions, making reimbursement and education opportunities a continued area of focus. Additional resources for scholarships and pipeline programs are also needed to draw more people into the field, as many positions (such as mental health workers, technicians, and sitters) do not require advanced degrees.



Source: MHA Surveys



WHERE CRITICAL GAPS REMAIN

Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

Critical Gaps: Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

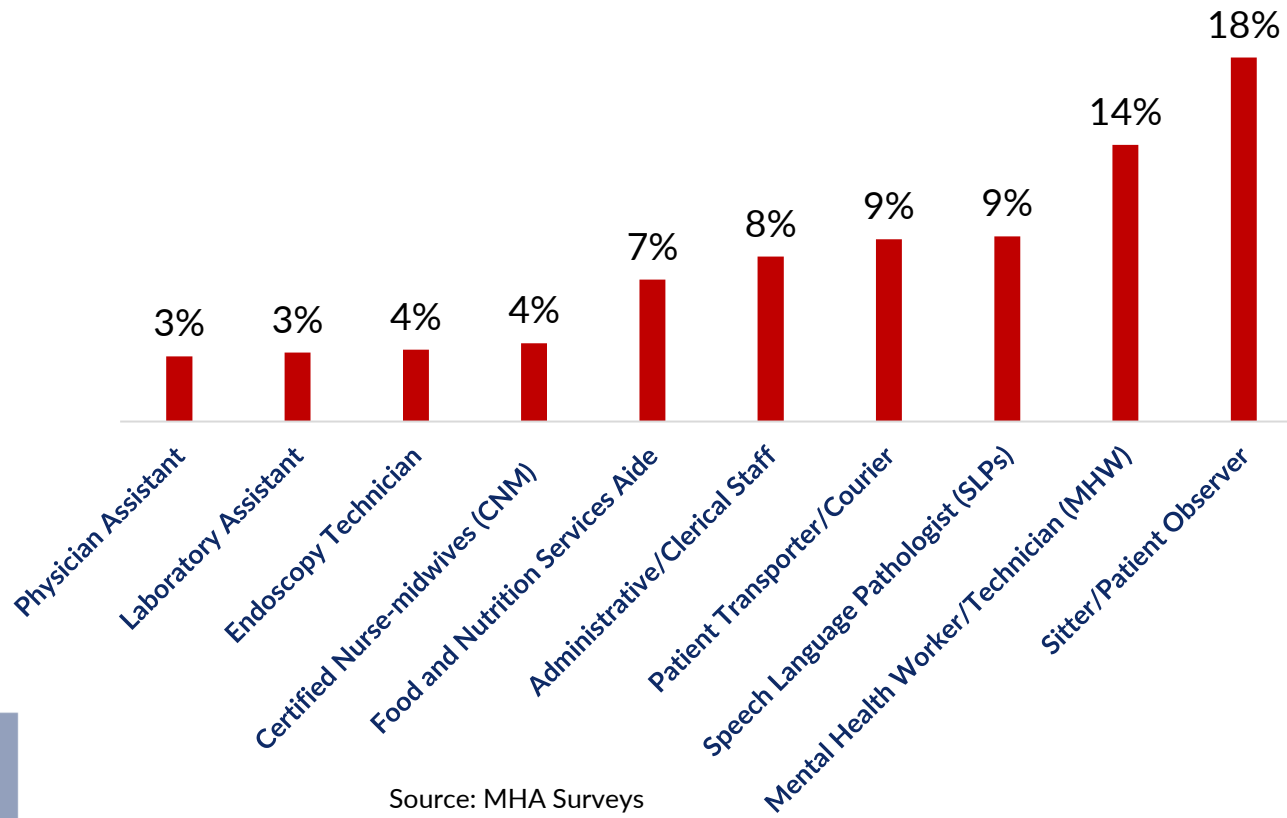
Given Massachusetts' strides in recent years to shrink vacancies among a number of key patient-facing roles, now is the time to focus on specific positions where large gaps persist and are hindering timely patient care.

Of the top 10 patient-facing roles with the highest vacancy rates, nine are above 20%. This includes numerous technician roles that are important in the performance of surgeries and procedures. Gaps among sitters/patient observers and community health workers well exceed the statewide median vacancy rate of 14.2%.

Top 10 Hospital Positions with Highest Vacancy Rates

Sitter/Patient Observer (45%)
Community Health Worker (27%)
Endoscopy Technician (21%)
Cardiac Catheter Technician (21%)
Licensed Practical Nurse (21%)
Mental Health Worker (20%)
Surgical Technician (20%)
Paramedic (20%)
Certified Nurse-Midwife (20%)
Patient Transporter (19%)

Largest Increases in Vacancy Rates 2023-2024



Source: MHA Surveys
Figures represent percentage point increases

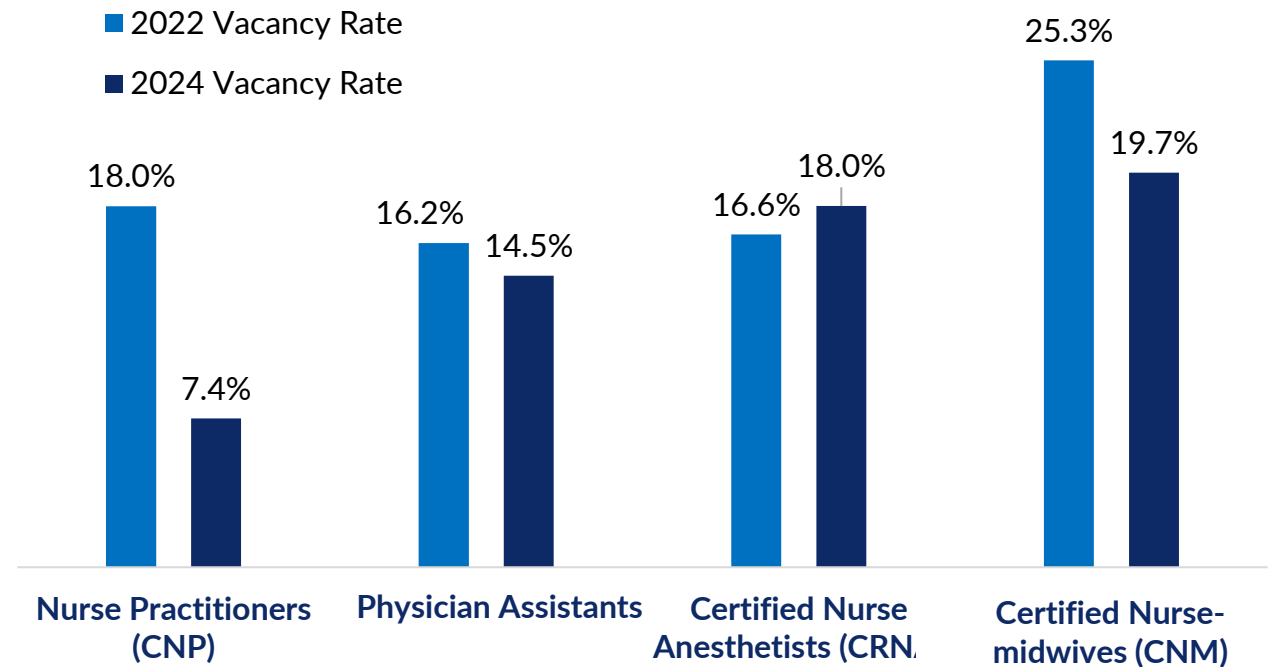
MHA's latest survey shows the top 10 key roles where vacancy rates have grown the most since 2023.

Both the volume and severity of behavioral health needs have increased among Massachusetts patients. In parallel, the need for sitters, patient observers, and mental health workers has also grown (*see page 11*). These roles have historically experienced high turnover rates and are hard to fill.

Critical Gaps: Advanced Practice Providers

Advanced practice providers have the education and training necessary to perform some of the same duties as physicians, including the diagnosis and treatment of conditions. Their ability to perform these duties helps foster timely, efficient care for patients and hospitals – especially as demand grows and capacity constraints remain tight.

Significant progress has been made in hiring nurse practitioners, with gaps moving from 18% in 2022 to 7% in 2024. However, vacancy rates among certified nurse-midwives and certified nurse anesthetists remain high.

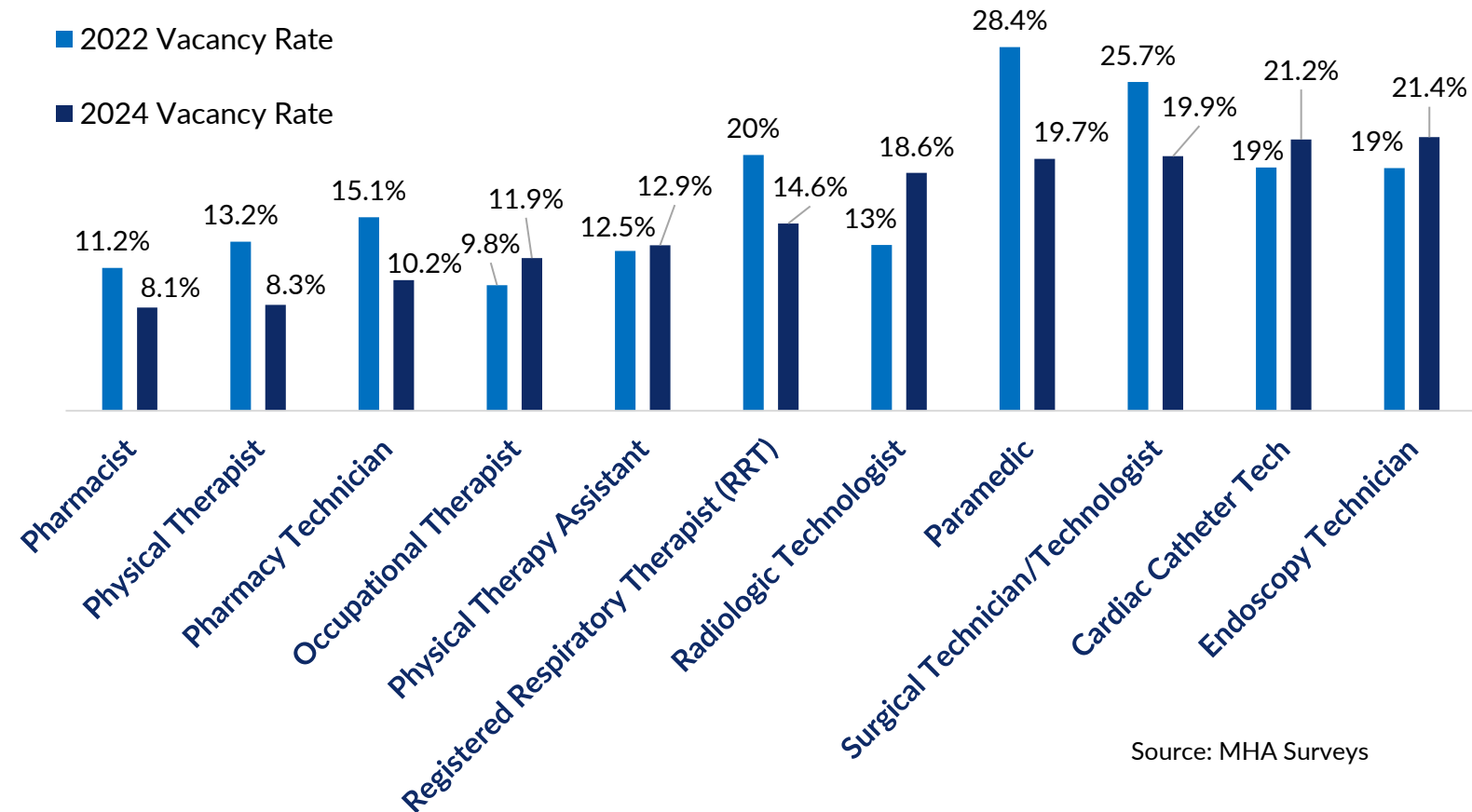


Source: MHA Surveys

Critical Gaps: Allied Health Professionals

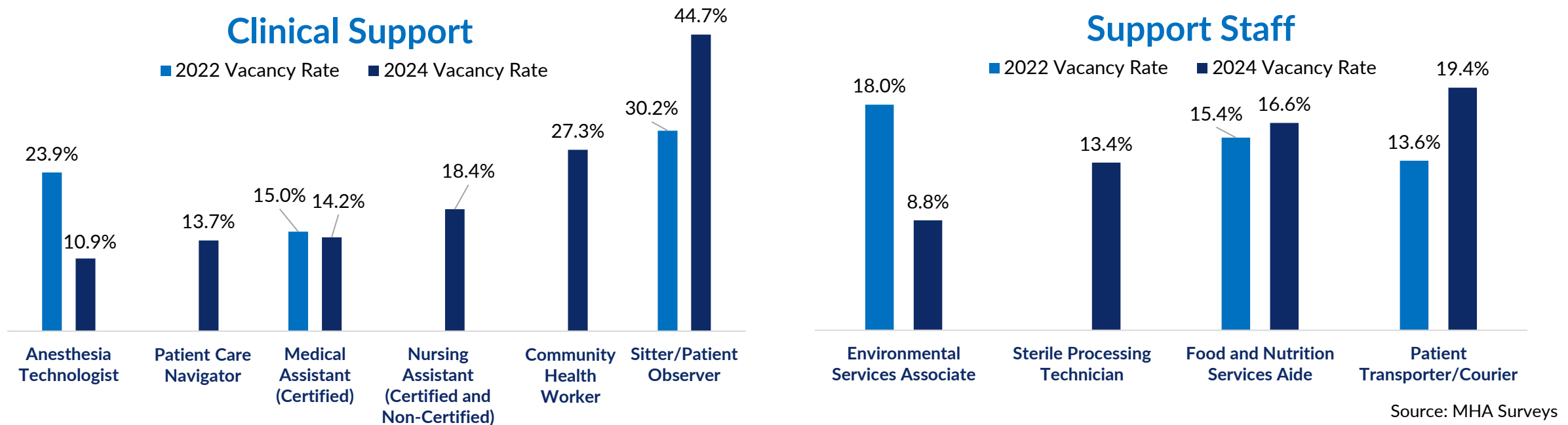
Allied health professionals work in concert with doctors and nurses to execute medical services for patients in all areas of the hospital – including in the pharmacy, surgery, and recovery. Like advanced practice providers, they are essential to the delivery of efficient, specialized care that keeps hospitals' 24/7 operations in motion.

While there has been some improvement in hiring for roles such as paramedics, vacancy rates for surgical techs and respiratory therapists remain high. Workforce gaps have also widened among key technician roles (endoscopy, cardiac catheter, and radiologic).



Source: MHA Surveys

Critical Gaps: Clinical Support & Support Staff



Shortages also persist within roles that support compassionate clinical care, connect patients with necessary resources, and oversee the basic daily operations of medical facilities.

Community health workers and nursing/medical assistants are among the greatest areas of need (and, as shown earlier in this report, vacancies for sitters/patient observers have increased dramatically).

Vacancy rates also remain high for both food and nutrition service aides and patient transporters, entry-level roles that provide pathways to career mobility.

A photograph of a healthcare worker in a light blue uniform assisting an elderly patient in a hospital hallway. The worker is supporting the patient from behind, and the patient is using a walker. The hallway has several doors and a hand sanitizer dispenser on the wall. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

THE PATH FORWARD

Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

The Path Forward: Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

Massachusetts' intense focus on the healthcare workforce in recent years has produced clear results. Around 10,000 hospital jobs have been added since 2020, while vacancy rates have decreased by 28% in a span of just two years. These trends are a testament to what can be accomplished through the leadership and innovation of Massachusetts healthcare organizations, the bold actions of local policymakers, and the partnership of organizations across the continuum of care.

Massachusetts must maintain this momentum. These are just a few of the reforms and initiatives the commonwealth can embrace to support existing healthcare workers and draw new talent into key roles:



POLICY REFORMS | Protect, grow, and innovate the workforce by passing legislation to:

- ✓ **Protect healthcare workers from acts of violence** ([H.2655](#) / [S.1718](#)) is supported in partnership with MHA, the Massachusetts Nurses Association, and 1199SEIU)
- ✓ **Provide tax credits to doctors, nurses, and physician assistants who serve as unpaid preceptors** to students, mirroring Maine, Maryland, and other states ([H.3218](#) / [S.1960](#))
- ✓ **Support the role of community health workers** through fair reimbursement ([H.359](#) / [S.251](#)) is supported by MHA and more than a dozen partner organizations, including Health Care For All, the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, and the Massachusetts Association of Community Health Workers)
- ✓ **Streamline burdensome prior authorization practices** that drive burnout ([H.1136](#) / [S.1403](#)) is supported in partnership with MHA, the Massachusetts Medical Society, and Health Care For All)
- ✓ **Empower qualified physician assistants to admit psychiatric patients** and enable "licensed mental health professionals" to include master's level clinicians working towards licensure ([H.1131](#) / [S.773](#))
- ✓ **Advance new models of care** that maximize the talents of caregivers, including telehealth ([H.1130](#) / [S.763](#)), hospital-at-home ([H.1141](#) / [S.806](#)), and mobile integrated health ([H.1154](#) / [S.726](#))

The Path Forward: Massachusetts' Healthcare Workforce

 **TARGETED STATEWIDE & REGIONAL PLANS** | Fill care gaps for key clinical roles, including advanced practice providers and allied health professionals, through:

- ✓ **Anticipating future demand for essential roles** and building targeted strategies to grow the pipeline
- ✓ **Establishing early college programs** with healthcare-recognized credentials and stackable credits
- ✓ **Building and strengthening regional partnerships with community colleges** to expand faculty and seats for high-need roles
- ✓ **Exploring regional clinical training sites** to make preceptorship more convenient and less costly
- ✓ **Investing in innovative training** such as simulation as a bridge to practice **and innovative care models** like virtual and group sitting

 **ADDITIONAL INVESTMENTS & TRAINING STRATEGIES** | Replicate Massachusetts' recent success in building the nursing and behavioral health workforce by focusing on other patient-facing roles through:

- ✓ **Identifying new clinical training funding sources** for apprenticeships, scholarships, and tuition reimbursement (including state funding, philanthropy and social impact, workforce training funds)
- ✓ **Continuing to invest in English proficiency training programs**, which can help workers enter and advance within the healthcare field
- ✓ **Learning from the Health Policy Commission's Behavioral Health Rate Adequacy study** to ensure the financial stability of behavioral health units and facilities, and to allow behavioral health providers to pay their workforce competitive salaries
- ✓ **Promoting healthcare as the best sector and economic driver** for stable, well-paying, meaningful careers with significant career ladder and growth opportunities



**Learn more about local hospitals and health
systems' workforce efforts at mhalink.org.**

CONTACT: communications@mhalink.org