



Allied Health Care Workforce Shortages in California

An Issue Summary

The current state of California's economy, along with the national recession, has caused many health care professionals to postpone retirement or increase work hours. This has temporarily eased the allied health care workforce shortages that hospitals faced in 2008. Allied health includes such professions as respiratory therapists and technicians, diagnostic sonographers, and medical assistants, among many others. Despite the temporary easing of these shortages in the near term, California must focus on developing a sufficient supply of qualified, culturally competent allied health professionals to meet the long-term demands for health care services in the state. Two specific allied health professions projected to face long-term shortages include clinical laboratory scientists and radiological technologists.

The Issue

According to the California Department of Finance, California's population is expected to increase by 5 million people by the year 2020, with more than 6 million of the state's total residents projected to be 65 years of age or older. This "aging" of California's population represents a 75.4 percent rise since 2000, and is resulting in an increased demand for health care services. National health reform, when fully implemented, is also expected to increase the need for services due to an expansion of insurance coverage.

In addition, California has the most ethnically diverse population in the nation, with projections indicating that it will become even more diverse in the coming decade. For example, the Latino population in the state is projected to rise from 32.4 percent in 2000 to 41.4 percent in 2020.

These projected growth and demographic statistics underscore the need to develop a pipeline of qualified, culturally competent allied health professionals who can deliver quality, appropriate care to California's growing, aging and culturally diverse patient population.

Top Allied Health Workforce Needs

During the past decade, shortages of primary care doctors and nurses have been widely publicized. The severe nurse shortage led to initiatives and efforts to reduce the shortages, although they will undoubtedly continue. Meanwhile, less publicized shortages in non-nursing allied health professions also threaten access to care.

Clinical Laboratory Scientists

The shortage of clinical laboratory scientists (CLS) is one of the most pressing workforce issues currently facing hospitals. These skilled workers are an integral part of the patient-care delivery team, conducting a wide range of diagnostic tests, from simple blood tests to genetic testing. Delays in diagnosis and treatment caused by the CLS shortage have the potential to limit access to care by increasing emergency room wait times and hospital lengths of stay, in addition to delaying surgeries and other procedures.

California's supply of trained CLS is already at critically low levels. Today, there are only 13 educational programs in California for CLS education (four academic and nine hospital-based) that produce approximately 119 to 125 graduates annually. At this rate, California will be unable to fill the 190 projected openings for CLS positions annually due to growth and retirements in the coming decade.

Radiological Technologists

Radiological technologists take X-rays and may specialize in modalities such as computed tomography, magnetic resonance imaging, mammography and cardiovascular interventional radiology. Medical imaging positions are some of the most difficult to fill due to a limited supply of formal, accredited training programs, particularly in these specialty areas. Many hospitals in California must provide their own on-the-job training, a challenge for facilities that are already under-staffed. In addition, rural communities and regions that do not have radiological technologist programs within a reasonable distance face significant challenges in recruiting imaging professionals. These hospitals are sometimes forced to limit services because there are simply not enough qualified imaging professionals.

Policy Recommendation

California's community colleges and public universities provide a majority of accredited health professions training opportunities for individuals seeking a career in health care. In addition to offering accredited programs, these public institutions also educate and train the most diverse cadre of students in the state. The California Hospital Association (CHA) recommends long-term planning for the development of a qualified, diverse allied health workforce. This requires state budget cuts to be prioritized in a way that will not cripple California's ability to train allied health professionals within the state's community college and public university systems. Preserving these institutions' capacity to train professionals to go into high-demand jobs, such as health care, will facilitate California's economic recovery and ensure that we meet the long-term increased need for health care services in the state.