

# Health Center Workforce: Caring for Today's Patients, Preparing for Tomorrow



## Retaining and Recruiting Health Center Employees to Ensure High Quality Care

**Over 265,000 dedicated professionals** work at Community Health Centers across the nation. Physicians, nurse practitioners, nurse midwives, dentists, physician assistants, optometrists, pharmacists, behavioral health specialists, case managers, allied health professionals, and administrative staff **deliver comprehensive, high-quality primary care to more than 30 million adult and pediatric patients at more than 14,000 delivery sites nationwide.**

These integrated care teams are the backbone of the Community Health Center program. **Severe workforce shortages, which existed before the pandemic, and growing salary gaps make it difficult for health centers to retain and recruit staff.** Burnout, early retirement, marketplace competition, and the COVID-19 pandemic have strained a fragile workforce.

**A recent NACHC membership survey found health centers experienced unprecedented rates of workforce loss in 2021:**

68% of health centers reported losing 5-25% of their workforce in the last six months, and 15% reported losing 25-50%.

Nurses represent the highest-ranked category of workforce loss, followed by Administrative Staff, Behavioral Health Staff, Dental Staff, and more.

Competition from other employers and pandemic stress are the most common reasons for staff departure. Most health centers rank one of these as the top reason why staff leave.

In addition, policy changes from the upcoming **unwinding of the Public Health Emergency and the expiration of pandemic relief funding will financially impact health centers and reduce resources for direct patient care.** A recent NACHC survey of health centers found that 30% of health centers may need to lay off staff due to these changes and because of static federal funding.

Health centers understand today's challenging budget environment and the many reasons the nation faces significant primary care provider shortages. **Federal investments and policy changes** to support the existing and future workforce, **and the creation of a new Bureau of Health Workforce (BHW) innovation program** will help strengthen and reinvigorate the primary care workforce.

### FY24 Multi-Year Base Funding - Health Center Workforce Requests

- **The National Health Service Corps (NHSC)** connects primary healthcare clinicians to people with limited access to healthcare in high-need areas. Thousands of NHSC providers serve at more than 10,000 community health center sites. **Funding Request: Support bipartisan efforts to extend funding to enhance the primary care workforce.**
- **The Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education (THCGME) Program** trains providers in Community Health Center settings. Health centers operate over one-third of THCGMEs, and 82% of graduates end up in primary care settings, such as health centers. More than twice as many Teaching Health Center graduates practice in underserved and rural areas when compared to traditional GME graduates. **Funding Request: Robust funding for a minimum of three years.**

# Planning for the Future Health Center Workforce



## FY24 Discretionary Funding - Health Center Workforce Requests

- The Nurse Corps Scholarship and Loan Repayment Program** pays student tuition, fees, and other educational costs in exchange for a commitment to working in a healthcare shortage area after graduation. The program supports more than 600 nurses at Community Health Centers.  
**Funding Request: Minimum of \$92.4 million FY23 funding level.**
- Postgraduate Nurse Practitioner Residency and Fellowship Training Programs** have been established in over 100 Community Health Centers to provide new primary care and psychiatric/mental health nurse practitioners with an intensive one year of postgraduate clinical training.  
**Funding Request: \$25 million**
- Promoting Resilience and Mental Health Among Health Professional Workforce Program** supports entities including health centers that provide mental and behavioral health services for staff.  
**Funding Request: Robust Funding**
- Behavioral Health Workforce Development Programs** develop and expand the behavioral health workforce, serving populations across the lifespan, including rural and medically underserved areas. In 2020, over 2.8 million people received behavioral health services at Community Health Centers – a 100 percent increase from 2014 to 2020 due to significant federal investments in behavioral health services. However, **HRSA estimates that another 7.7 million health center patients need behavioral health care.** Federal investments in creating wider behavioral health pipelines will be critical to addressing the post-COVID mental and substance use crises.  
**Funding Request: Robust Funding**

## Health Center Workforce Policy Recommendations

**Establish a new Health Care Workforce Innovation Fund within the Health Resources and Services Administration Bureau of Health Workforce.** Retaining and recruiting medical and dental assistants is one of the most persistent problems health centers face. There are limited options to promote these fields despite the significant need. A new flexible fund would enable new pipeline programs, such as pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and career laddering programs that offer certifications for participants and provide a pathway to a rewarding career in healthcare. A new grant program would enable existing health centers and other community-based programs to be scaled and replicated, particularly in rural and frontier communities.

**Provide incentives, including financial support, to health centers establishing formal agreements with academic institutions** that educate nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nursing, dental and medical students under which the health centers accept their students for formal clinical training experiences and provide preceptors as part of that training.

**Revamp the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program to provide additional incentives for non-clinical, non-allied health professionals and administrative, clinical support staff (information technology, finance, revenue cycle, communications, grants management, and special programs) who work in federally qualified health centers.** Health centers have a robust, dedicated workforce that supports their infrastructure operations. Opportunities that incentivize administrative support staff to continue their career in a federally qualified health center will be essential to retain a vibrant workforce.