



By Brian Justice

Labor shortages have plagued every industry in the United States over the last two years, and health care is no exception. In early 2022, the number of available jobs—11.3 million—was nearly twice the number of unemployed workers.¹ In the health care space occupied by medical assistants and similar positions, 6.5 million workers are expected to leave their jobs in the next five years, with fewer than 2 million ready to take their place.²

“It’s no secret that the American health care system is understaffed and overworked,” says Ryan Hetrick, CEO of Epiphany Wellness in Blackwood, New Jersey. “The lack of medical assistants and other support staff is a major problem in ambulatory care centers, especially [because] many patients are now relying on such centers for their primary care.”

Statistics back Hetrick up. A majority of health care leaders (88%) reported difficulty recruiting medical assistants, according to

a Medical Group Management Association poll.³

This shortage is drawing comments and attention from top government officials. “The nation’s health depends on the well-being of our health workforce,” says Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. “Now, we owe them a debt of gratitude and action. And if we fail to act, we place our nation’s health at risk.”⁴

IN HIGH DEMAND

Labor shortages affect health care facilities in every region and state, regardless of need, population, or practice.

“It’s been really tough,” says Nora Clemmens, CMA (AAMA), a medical assistant with miCare, an on-site clinic for employees of Yakima, Washington (i.e., an employer-sponsored health care clinic). “We’re in a remote place and have to be self-sufficient. We were a testing site for COVID-19 and came up with good guide-

lines and processes but still did not have enough hands for full coverage.”

Labor shortages are not new. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, burnout among health care workers had reached crisis levels, according to the National Academies of Medicine.⁴ And even though COVID-19 has waned, burnout is still a problem.

“Attrition in health care can be a life-or-death issue,” says Joanna Bendarzewski, senior partner at Culture Partners in Temecula, California. “Burnout is rampant throughout the industry, and health care employees feeling unsupported, distrusted, or even fearful can impact patient safety issues.”

Further complicating the issue, as the demand for medical assistants has expanded, so too have their responsibilities. Regulations vary among states, but many medical assistants are now authorized to perform nasopharyngeal swabbing, administer vaccines, participate in telehealth, and provide more services in outpatient behavioral health clinics.³ The combination of a broadening scope of practice and predicted decrease in medical assistants entering the workforce makes restoring health care worker numbers a pressing need.

GET BACK TO BUSINESS

Practice managers can play a key role in overcoming challenges caused by labor shortages. “Start by utilizing current staff to their fullest capacity,” advises Aaron Olman, cofounder of People on Point in Morristown, New Jersey, which advises companies on increasing productivity by reorganizing systems and processes. “Incentivize part-time or per diem employees on a shift-per-shift basis or with bonuses for hitting a certain number of increased hours over a predetermined period. If possible, increase base compensation or sign-on bonuses for new employees willing to commit to a certain

number of hours.”

Employers should also take a fresh look at the way they review résumés and communicate with potential employees, according to Nathan Lenyszyn, MBA, vice president of marketing at HealthLink Dimensions in Atlanta, Georgia.

“Since the demand for health care support professionals has greatly increased, don’t discard an applicant if they appear to have job jumped a little,” advises Lenyszyn. “While that used to indicate potential issues, now there’s the good chance that they made changes because they can make more money somewhere else. ... That doesn’t mean a bad hire, though.”

He also advises that, even in the current environment, employers avoid shortcuts like not checking references.

Additionally, while text messaging is now a common way to source candidates and coordinate interviews, typos and other mistakes are easy to make. “No matter how the text from the candidate reads, maintain a constant level of professionalism on your end and make sure that your messages reflect that,” adds Lenyszyn.

TEAMWORK WORKS

Clemmens has seen human resources (HR) adjust to the new status quo. “[HR departments] have changed the way they look for and hire people,” says Clemmens. “[They are implementing] referral bonuses after a new hire has been on board for 90 days, proactively contacting people from schools, and changing job descriptions to better fit people already on staff.”

Employers can also reorganize existing teams, suggests Jeremy Gray, CMA (AAMA), director of medical operations at the Charleston Men’s Clinic in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.



“Everyone in our organization had to step up and assume multiple roles to accommodate the needs of our patients,” says Gray. “But we take the strain off everyone we can when we have extra time throughout the day, and to retain talent we offer more competitive salaries, flexible work schedules, and [paid time off] benefits.”

In the face of increased demand and decreased resources, creating a supportive culture is critical, suggests Bendarzewski.

“After exhausting all your options to attract talent, leverage culture. That should be considered a must-have in a new business model,” says Bendarzewski. “Creating a positive experience aligns the organization and drives accountability. [It] not only helps retain great employees but also attracts new ones as the organization’s good reputation grows.”

The caring professions require a genuine manifestation of just that—care. New or revised strategies or tactics for finding and—more importantly—retaining employees cannot replace genuine concern for all stakeholders.

“With the added strain of our employee shortage, it has been difficult to keep relationships and rapport,” says Gray. “Nevertheless, we place a lot of pride in providing patients with the best level of care we are able to give them.” ♦

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TIPS FOR DECREASING STAFF TURNOVER

Rebecca Dufner, MD, MBA, shares tools for reducing turnover in the health care workplace⁵:

Define and declare the purpose of your organization. Defining an organization’s purpose, whether organizational, broad, or niche, in a clearly stated mission statement drives buy-in from staff by articulating a collective purpose.

Get to know each member of the team. Invest time into each team member to understand their priorities and goals, anticipate what makes them happy in their roles, and provide projects and opportunities to keep their activities meaningful and engaging.

Build an organizational structure of matching hiring practices to roles. Consider how long someone is expected to remain in their position, then create and leverage opportunities for growth to maximize duration and minimize turnover.

Reorganize management if needed. People management is not a nicety—it is essential. However, research on competitiveness around salary and benefits is time-consuming. Investing in a business manager or—better yet—promoting an already strong employee into such a role can be advantageous to a practice.

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