

# Clinics scramble to find qualified entry-level workers

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By LORA HINES/The Press-Enterprise

Many nonprofit clinics that provide services, including dental and health care, can't find and retain enough qualified, well-trained employees as the number of low-income and uninsured Californians increases.

A recent survey paid for by the California Wellness Foundation found that about 80 percent of 108 nonprofit clinics statewide couldn't find employees, especially licensed vocational nurses, dental assistants and case managers, who perform diagnostic, technical and therapeutic services. Many of these positions, which researchers estimate represent about 60 percent of the health care profession, are entry-level jobs requiring training certificates or associate degrees.

As a result, more than half of the surveyed clinics hired temporary workers or outsourced their work, while 72 percent paid overtime to staff.

Meanwhile, more than 6.5 million Californians are uninsured and need affordable health care.

"The economic situation is putting a further strain on our collective (health care) safety net and community clinics are working to meet this demand under very challenging circumstances," said Carmela Castellano-Garcia, president and CEO of the California Primary Care Association. The organization represents about 800 nonprofit community clinics and health centers statewide.

Susan Chapman, an associate professor at UC San Francisco's Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, said the state's lack of allied health care workers will become worse in about 10 years as California's population, especially the number of elderly people, increases.

"You can't run a hospital or a clinic without these workers," she said.

But community colleges can't afford the expense to train as many allied health professionals as the state needs, Chapman said. Some clinics are working with local programs to provide clinical training sites and increase the number of trained health workers.

Dr. Temetry Lindsey, president and CEO of Inland Behavioral & Health Services Inc. in San Bernardino, said she has had trouble recruiting qualified employees. Many new

employees who come right out of training programs still require a good bit of instruction, which takes time away from helping other patients, she said.

"The local curriculum is not holding true to our needs," said Lindsey, whose three clinics provide health and dental care, substance abuse treatment and social services to an estimated 10,000 people on a sliding scale based on need. "It does detract from our ability to deliver services."

Her clinics employ close to 100 people and rely on federal grants. They often do without new office equipment to pay salaries and provide services, she said. So far, Lindsey has not reduced salaries or laid off staff, Lindsey said.

Besides training issues, she said she also has had difficulty finding social workers and therapists, which has forced her to hire licensed psychologists or go without such expensive services.

"We watch every dime," she said. "We have a number of openings, but we take our time in filling in them. You have to be a good fit for what we do."

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