



Health Policy and Analytics
Health Care Workforce Initiatives

2026

Dental Assisting Workforce in Oregon

**An overview of the state of the profession
and efforts to address workforce shortage**

The full report can be accessed here: https://www.oregon.gov/oha/HPA/HP-HCW/HCWFDocuments/Dental%20Assisting%20Workforce%20in%20Oregon_08.31.26%20final.pdf.



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Executive summary

The dental assisting workforce plays a critical role in ensuring that dental practices across Oregon can provide timely, high-quality care. Dental assisting workforce shortages have impacts on patient access and practice operations, especially in rural and underserved communities. This report, developed by Oregon Health Authority (OHA) with Oregon Health & Science University's Oregon Translational and Clinical Sciences Institute (OCTRI) and supported by a federal grant, examines current workforce conditions, training pathways, employer perspectives, and statewide initiatives addressing ongoing shortages. Notably, dental assistant shortages reduce clinic capacity and provider participation, contributing to Oregon's Medicaid network adequacy challenges.

Dental practices in Oregon employed 5,525 dental assistants in 2024, with an estimated 813 annual job openings and an 11.6% projected 10-year employment growth rate. National data show that 40% of dentists are actively recruiting dental assistants, and nearly 90% find hiring extremely challenging. Early-career retention is low, and turnover imposes financial strain—vacancies can reduce daily practice revenue by up to 6%, with lengthy hiring timelines in rural settings.

Training pathways include the state's 16 community college and private vocational programs and on-the-job training. Education program completion rates range from 57% to 64%, with some programs having enrollment and

attrition issues. Data regarding on-the-job training efforts is limited despite its importance for rural workforce development.

Interviews with dental practices highlighted ongoing challenges in recruitment—limited applicant pools and resource-intensive onboarding—and retention concerns tied to job satisfaction, limited advancement opportunities, and misunderstanding of the role. Practices serving Medicaid populations are heavily impacted, with a need for workforce strategies to emphasize Medicaid-serving settings. Practices identified effective retention strategies, such as fostering respect and team integration, maintaining predictable schedules, offering benefits, and providing regular raises. Some practices invest in structured internal training programs and partnerships with colleges.

Community college programs described ongoing recruitment challenges, reliance on outreach to high schools and dental providers, and the need for improved coordination with dental practices. They emphasized the importance of educating dentists about dental assistant scope of practice and four-handed dentistry to ensure appropriate utilization and team efficiency, as well as the importance of placing trainees in clinics serving Medicaid patients to improve access.

Statewide dental assistant efforts include the Oregon Board of Dentistry's Dental Assistant Workforce Shortage Advisory Committee, which recommends creating a statewide registry, expanding allowable duties, improving wage data collection, and strengthening high school recruitment. OHA's financial incentives and workforce grants support training expansion, diversity, and pathways, especially in Medicaid-serving settings. Higher Education Coordinating Commission's Future Ready Oregon and county-based programs supplemented these efforts.

Several priority strategies emerged from the interviews and data: strengthen collaboration between training programs and dental practices; expand

recruitment through high schools and dental providers; create a statewide registry to understand workforce size, demographics and languages spoken, certification levels, and wage variation; improve career ladders and wage transparency; increase dentist education on dental assistant roles and scope; and expand financial supports such as scholarships, stipends, and loan repayment.

Oregon's dental assisting workforce and particularly in Medicaid-serving clinics faces structural challenges that require coordinated action. Implementing the recommendations outlined across state agencies, educators, and employers can improve workforce stability, strengthen clinical teams, and ensure better access to oral health care statewide.

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