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Rural Focus

A New Approach to the Healthcare Workforce Challenges in Rural America

By Bill Gassen, President and CEO, *Sanford Health*

Over the past several years, hospitals and health systems have faced significant challenges—ranging from supply chain backlogs to reduced patient visits to record-high inflation—but none is more pressing than the shortage of available caregivers, especially in rural and underserved communities.

Our ability to fulfill the healthcare needs of our communities is dependent on solving today's workforce challenges.

To illustrate this pressing issue, consider that in the next 12 years experts predict that we will see 124,000 physicians leave the industry, up to 48,000 of whom are primary care physicians. In small towns, oftentimes the only physician serving the community is a primary care physician, so a loss of that magnitude has immense repercussions on health outcomes in rural America. We also expect to see significant shortages of nurses, medical assistants, and other support staff who are critical in making sure care is available to our patients.

There are many reasons behind the workforce shortage, which existed before but was exacerbated by the pandemic. So many of our frontline caregivers were pushed to their limits—physically and emotionally—as they sought to care for very sick patients while trying to protect their own health and that of their loved ones. After experiencing that kind of stress, many are facing burnout and choosing to leave the profession.

The departure of experienced medical staff has left a hole in the workforce that isn't easy to fill, especially for those of us who operate in rural communities. The reality is that there

are not enough employees looking to join the healthcare industry to make up for the loss of those leaving. In South Dakota and North Dakota, two of the states where Sanford Health delivers care, the unemployment rate as of September 2023 was 1.9 percent, with fewer than 10,000 unemployed people in each state looking for work (and even fewer who are trained to work in medicine).

When it comes to solutions, I don't presume to have all the answers. In fact, I firmly believe that it will take all of us in the industry working together to make lasting change. However, I can share some of the initiatives we have implemented at Sanford Health to establish a strong workforce for the future.

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About Sanford Health

Sanford Health, the largest rural health system in the United States, is dedicated to transforming the healthcare experience and providing access to world-class healthcare in America's heartland. Headquartered in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the organization serves more than 1 million patients and 201,000 health plan members across 250,000 square miles. The integrated health system has 46 medical centers, 2,800 Sanford physicians and advanced practice providers, 170 clinical investigators and research scientists, 186 Good Samaritan Society senior living centers, and world clinics in nine countries around the globe. Learn more about Sanford Health's commitment to shaping the future of rural healthcare across the lifespan at www.sanfordhealth.org or [Sanford Health News](#).

We approach our work differently. By creating operational efficiencies, our caregivers can focus on their most meaningful work: delivering high-quality patient care. At Sanford Health, we are doing this by prioritizing investments in technology and automation that reduce administrative tasks for frontline staff. As an example, our team developed a predictive analytics tool called LAMP to more precisely schedule clinical staff based on patient demand forecasting. By better anticipating staffing needs, we are limiting off-schedule calls to our nurses, which has improved job satisfaction and reduced our reliance on agency staff. LAMP has saved scheduling managers 40 hours per week. This is time that can be spent caring for patients at the bedside and mentoring newer nurses.

We are fundamentally changing the way we deliver care. Two-thirds of the patients we serve at Sanford Health live in rural areas and are more likely to experience barriers to care. These access challenges are exacerbated by a shortage of healthcare providers in

rural communities. Sanford Health is bridging that care gap through expanded virtual care options that allow patients to talk with a trusted provider from the comfort of their home. A new virtual care center, currently under construction in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and set to be fully operational by late 2024, will serve as the hub for this work featuring dedicated clinician workspaces equipped with the latest telemedicine technology to offer on-demand urgent care, behavioral health care, and primary care.

We are reinvesting in our people and making Sanford Health an employer of choice for the future.

We are working in a number of ways to attract and retain the caregivers we need today and cultivate the workforce we know we will need tomorrow. To create a robust pipeline of future caregivers, we have partnered with universities across our region to fully fund 15 residency and fellowship programs, which allow us to train more than 300 future physicians each year for rural practice. Our strong partnerships with the nursing schools allow us to provide clinical training for 6,500 students and 260 summer nurse clinical internships, as well as scholarships and sponsorships to reduce the barrier of tuition for those who want to pursue a nursing career.

To retain our existing employees, we launched a comprehensive leadership development program that provides a path for career growth within our organization for clinical and support services employees. We also focus heavily on creating a positive and inclusive workplace culture that values the voices of our people. Twice a year, we ask all employees to share their thoughts with us through a survey and we then use their feedback to drive system priorities. Employee feedback has led to the establishment of initiatives such as a clinician well-being council, peer support groups, a clinician mentorship program, a professional practice support program with peer-to-peer coaching, and a clinician assistance program that includes confidential counseling. Offering a flexible working schedule with the option for some employees to work from home, expanded leave options, and annual compensation increases are just a few other ways we are meeting the needs of our people.

While there is no silver bullet to solve rural America's healthcare workforce shortage, there are plenty of creative ideas that we can put into practice. At this year's [Summit on the Future of Rural Health Care](#), Sanford Health convened key leaders from across the industry to discuss this very topic. One of our main takeaways was that as rural healthcare providers, we have a unique opportunity to try new, innovative approaches to the challenges we face. By thinking differently about our challenges and being willing to test out new approaches, we have the potential to dramatically transform healthcare for those we serve.

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Key Board Takeaways

- Foster internal innovation and a culture of problem-solving.
- Think holistically about how to build a pipeline of future workers—for today, as well as for the long term.
- Establish channels for two-way communication between leadership and employees to ensure your people have a platform to share their voices and use their feedback to improve workplace culture.
- Invest in technology that supports your employees and allows them to focus on what they do best: caring for patients.

The Governance Institute thanks Bill Gassen, President and CEO of Sanford Health, for contributing this article. Connect with Bill on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/billgassen](https://www.linkedin.com/in/billgassen).

