The Growing Demand for Healthcare Workers in Oklahoma

The United States has faced shortages of healthcare workers for years; a challenge that was only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2018, even before the pandemic, there were 27 open healthcare practitioner jobs — such as doctors, surgeons, registered nurses — for every available unemployed healthcare practitioner across the country.¹ And the situation in Oklahoma is no exception.² Despite the many barriers that internationally trained healthcare workers face to practicing medicine in the state, immigrants routinely punch above their weight in the field.³ In 2019, they made up 7.0 percent of the state’s healthcare workers⁴ — including 20.9 percent of all physicians and surgeons⁵ — while making up 6.0 percent of the population.⁶

For Oklahoma to remain competitive and address critical shortages of physicians and other healthcare practitioners, it will be crucial to implement policies that not only attract and retain global talent that is complementary to the U.S.-born workforce, but that also build career pathways for immigrants who already call the state home.

One way to achieve this goal is to join states like Minnesota and Washington in reducing barriers for international medical graduates (IMGs) and other internationally trained healthcare workers.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, labor shortages, and a growing number of baby boomers who are reaching retirement age each year, Oklahoma has seen an increase in demand for healthcare workers.

From 2017 to 2021, there were 273,269 unique healthcare worker job postings in Oklahoma,⁷ an increase of +55.3% From 2017 to 2021, the top five in-demand healthcare jobs in Oklahoma were:⁹

1. Registered Nurses
2. Medical Records Specialists
3. Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses
4. Clinical Laboratory Technicians
5. Physicians

During the same time, the advertised wages also rose from $33.17 to $33.66 per hour,⁸ or +$0.48/hr

During the same period, the top Oklahoma employers hiring healthcare workers were:¹⁰

1. Integris Health
2. Ascension
3. Mercy
4. SSM Health
5. Healthcare Employment Network
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**ONLINE JOB POSTINGS FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS, 2017 – 2021**

- **Opticians, Dispensing**: +364.5%
- **Optometrists**: +328.1%
- **Magnetic Resonance Imaging Technologists**: +175.4%
- **Dental Hygienists**: +165.2%
- **Pharmacy Technicians**: +150.7%
- **Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses**: +148.1%

As employers struggle to recruit and retain specialized healthcare workers, immigrants play a crucial role in helping to address labor shortages. With an increase in demand for multilingual and culturally competent employees, internationally trained healthcare professionals are uniquely positioned to provide support across all healthcare settings.

The average share of healthcare workers from 2015 to 2019 who were immigrants:

- **4.4%** Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses
- **3.8%** Dentists
- **3.1%** Pharmacy Technicians
- **1.5%** Dental Hygienists

From 2017 to 2021, the number of healthcare job postings that required bilingual skills in Oklahoma increased by +809.1%. 
HEALTHCARE JOB POSTINGS BY RURAL-URBAN CLASSIFICATION

The number of job postings between 2017 and 2021 by Oklahoma County Classification:

For small/medium metro counties increased by +38.6%

For rural counties decreased by -10.8%

PHYSICIANS

In 2015, long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Oklahoma faced severe physician shortages, with some counties across the state registering eight physicians per 100,000 residents. Projections remain dire. Oklahoma is expected to need an additional 451 primary care physicians by 2030, significantly impacting the accessibility of healthcare, particularly in rural communities.

ONLINE JOB POSTINGS FOR PHYSICIANS, 2017 – 2021

Obstetricians and Gynecologists +102.1%

Anesthesiologists +81.2%

Surgeons, Except Ophthalmologists +70.4%

Pediatricians, General +66.1%

Pediatricians, General +22.0%

The average share of physicians from 2015 to 2019 who were immigrants: 20.9%
BRAIN WASTE IN OKLAHOMA

Although there is a growing need for healthcare workers in Oklahoma, many immigrants who have received specialized education, training, and licensing abroad are unable to practice in the state, facing challenges such as recredentialing and language proficiency. Their skillsets are all too often underutilized — in what is known as “brain waste” — which frequently leads to under- or unemployment.21

In 2021, across Oklahoma:22

Share of residents who had a biology or healthcare-related bachelor’s degree but worked in an occupation that did not require a bachelor’s:

- **19.1%** FOREIGN-BORN
- **23.4%** U.S.-BORN

19.8% of immigrants with professional and doctorate degrees23 worked in occupations in the healthcare industry that did not require a medical doctorate or professional degree.

Addressing the barriers that prevent additional qualified, internationally trained healthcare workers from practicing in Oklahoma will be vital to helping the state meet its growing healthcare needs.
ENDNOTES


2. Unless stated otherwise, all data in this report is reflective of Oklahoma.

3. We define an immigrant as anyone born outside the country to non-U.S. citizen parents who is a resident in the United States. This includes naturalized citizens, green card holders, temporary visa holders, refugees, asylees, and undocumented immigrants, among others.


5. Ibid.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


14. Using the 2013 NCHS Urban–Rural Classification Scheme for Counties, Oklahoma counties were grouped into two different population groups: medium and small metropolitan, and rural counties. NCHS medium and small metropolitan counties were combined for the middle classification. Rural counties were identified using the micropolitan and non-core NCHS classifications.

15. Small and medium metro counties in Oklahoma include Creek, Le Flore, Okmulgee, Osage, Pawnee, Rogers, Sequoyah, Tulsa, Wagoner, Comanche, and Cotton counties.


23. Doctorate degrees include the fields of Biology and Life Sciences, Nuclear, Industrial Radiology and Biological Technologies, and Medical and Health Sciences and Services.