



Healthcare Workforce Recruitment and Retention Challenges in La Plata County: A Qualitative Analysis of Provider Perspectives

Introduction:

La Plata County, like many rural areas across the United States, faces significant challenges in recruiting and retaining healthcare workers. These challenges can impact access to care, quality of services, and overall community health. To better understand the specific workforce issues facing healthcare providers in La Plata County, a series of key informant interviews were conducted. This report summarizes the findings from these interviews and aims to provide insights that can inform community-wide strategies to address healthcare workforce needs.

Methods:

Zoom interviews were conducted with four healthcare providers representing different organizations in La Plata County. The interviews covered topics including staffing metrics, workforce gaps, recruitment and retention challenges, current strategies, and potential community support. Interview transcripts were analyzed to identify key themes and patterns across responses. The frequency of themes was noted, and representative quotes were selected to illustrate key points.

Results:

1. What metrics do you use to define your healthcare provider staffing needs?

The most common metrics used were:

- Patient demand/volume (4/4 respondents)
- Provider panel size/FTE (2/4)
- Wait times/3rd next available appointment (2/4)
- Quality measures (2/4)

One provider noted: "Patient demand, employee feedback, national per capita standards, budget availability, etc."

2. Currently, where do you see the greatest needs or gaps in terms of the overall healthcare workforce in La Plata County?

The greatest workforce needs identified were:

- Dental assistants/hygienists (2/4)
- Medical assistants (2/4)
- Primary care physicians (2/4)
- Specialty care providers (2/4)

A representative quote highlighted: "Overall, what has been a glaring need for us has been dental assistance."

3. What are the greatest challenges you see in filling needed positions within your organization?

Key challenges in filling positions included:

- Housing affordability/availability (4/4)
- Competitive salaries (3/4)
- Childcare availability (2/4)
- Qualified candidates (2/4)

One provider emphasized: "Affordable housing continues to be a challenge and housing availability in general."

4. What plans or strategies do you have to address these challenges?

Strategies to address recruitment challenges included:

- Adjusting job requirements/qualifications (2/4)
- Increasing flexibility/benefits (2/4)
- Focusing on selling Durango lifestyle (1/4)
- Creative staffing solutions (1/4)

An innovative approach was described: "We are super creative. We have EMTs. We have taken kids on the way to Med school and PA school."

5. How would you describe the effectiveness of your plans or strategies?

Responses indicated:

- Average/mixed results (2/4)
- Some success, but ongoing challenges (2/4)

One provider noted: "It's funny that team members I talked to all rated our strategies to address recruitment, as average, because everything is, in the works."

6. What, if anything, do you think the community can do to support your recruiting efforts?

Providers suggested the community could help by:

- Supporting affordable housing development (3/4)
- Developing "welcoming" initiatives for new residents (2/4)
- Providing loan repayment programs (2/4)
- Supporting childcare availability (2/4)

A provider suggested: "And then, supporting the development of more housing land banking activities."

7. In which categories of the healthcare workforce do you experience the greatest employee turnover?

The categories with the greatest employee turnover were:

- Entry-level/front desk positions (4/4)
- Medical assistants (2/4)

One provider stated: "Entry level positions, particularly in our detox for us, are the highest level of turnover."

8. What have you learned are the key reasons why employees leave their jobs with your organization?

Key reasons why employees leave included:

- Cost of living/housing affordability (3/4)
- Pursuing further education (3/4)
- Higher pay elsewhere (2/4)
- Relocation (2/4)

A common theme was expressed as: "We can't afford to buy a house here. So we're moving to North Carolina with my partner"

9. What methods do you use to understand why employees leave?

Providers used the following methods:

- Exit interviews (4/4)
- Ongoing communication (2/4)

One provider explained: "If someone wants an individual exit interview, if somebody wants to talk one on one that's always available to them"

10. What plans or strategies do you have to minimize employee turnover?

Approaches to improve retention included:

- Cultivating positive work culture (3/4)
- Offering flexibility (2/4)
- Staff appreciation events (1/4)
- Professional development opportunities (1/4)

A provider emphasized: "If you wanna retain people, you have to have a good work culture, a better work culture."

11. What, if anything, do you think the community can do to support your retention efforts?

Providers suggested the community could support retention efforts by:

- Supporting affordable housing development (3/4)
- Providing educational/training opportunities (2/4)
- Offering loan repayment programs (1/4)
- Enhancing community events/activities (1/4)

One provider suggested: "Potentially more educational opportunities kind of within the area. specifically because we don't. We have aesthetic nurses. But that's kind of a different need and kind of a different type of nursing."

Discussion:

The interviews reveal that healthcare providers in La Plata County face multi-faceted challenges in recruiting and retaining workforce. While each organization has developed strategies to address these issues, there is a clear need for community-wide efforts to support the healthcare workforce.

Housing affordability emerged as the most consistent challenge across all interviews. This issue impacts both recruitment of new staff and retention of existing employees. Community initiatives to increase affordable housing options could significantly benefit healthcare workforce stability.

Competitive compensation, particularly for entry-level positions, was another key challenge. While individual organizations have limited ability to increase wages, community-supported loan repayment programs or other financial incentives could help attract and retain healthcare workers.

The interviews also highlighted the need for stronger pipelines for healthcare workers, especially in roles like dental assistants and medical assistants. Community investment in local education and training programs could help build a more robust local healthcare workforce.

Childcare availability was noted as a significant challenge by half of the respondents. Community efforts to increase childcare options could support both recruitment and retention of healthcare workers with young families.

Finally, providers emphasized the importance of community integration and quality of life in retaining workers. Initiatives to welcome new residents and enhance community amenities could help make La Plata County a more attractive long-term home for healthcare workers.

In conclusion, addressing healthcare workforce challenges in La Plata County will require coordinated efforts between healthcare providers, local government, educational institutions, and the broader community. By focusing on key areas like housing, education, childcare, and community integration, La Plata County can work towards building a more stable and robust healthcare workforce to serve its residents.