



# **The COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on Rural Hospital Staffing**

Vaccine hesitancy and nurse staffing  
shortages jeopardize access to care

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## Amidst Delta Surge, Rural Hospital Staff Vaccination Rates Make Little Progress

Nurse staffing shortages leading to suspension of services in already vulnerable communities.

Earlier this year, the Chartis Center for Rural Health [published a study](#) that explored COVID-19 vaccination rates among rural hospital healthcare professionals. Our survey, which was conducted in March and April, found that vaccine hesitancy and resistance among staff was prominent and heavily rooted in matters of personal choice and mistrust. Nearly 40 percent of respondents said that just 50 to 69 percent of healthcare personnel were fully vaccinated at the time, while roughly one-quarter said the vaccination rate was less than 50 percent.

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In the intervening months, the Delta variant has surged across rural communities. By the beginning of September, infection rates had reached levels not seen since the early weeks of January.<sup>1</sup> News reports detailing staff exhaustion and shortages, intensive care units operating at full capacity, and the suspension of hospital services (e.g., obstetrics) were appearing with increased regularity. This domino effect caused by the Delta variant raises important questions about vaccination rate progress and the extent to which staffing challenges are impacting access to care within rural communities. We conducted a follow-up survey from September 21, 2021 to October 15, 2021 that generated 130 responses from rural hospital leaders nationwide.<sup>2</sup> Our survey found that:

- **44 percent** of respondents said the percentage of healthcare professionals fully vaccinated is between 50 and 69

- **75 percent** of respondents report that their facility *has not* mandated COVID vaccines for healthcare professionals
- **96 percent** of respondents said nursing is a role in which they are having difficulty filling
- **Nearly 30 percent** indicate that issues related to nurse staffing have resulted in the suspension of services, while another 22 percent say they are considering such action
- **42 percent** say the number one reason for nurse staff departures in 2021 are more financially lucrative opportunities at another hospital

## Vaccination Rates Among Rural Hospital Healthcare Professionals

In our previous survey, 37 percent of respondents indicated that 50 to 69 percent of the healthcare professionals in their hospitals were fully vaccinated. A little more than a quarter of respondents said that their fully vaccinated rate was 70 to 89 percent, while 10 percent noted the fully vaccinated rate was above 90 percent. With these most recent results, there have been modest increases in the 70 to 89 percent category (+3.8) and the 90 to 100 percent (+3.9) category, but the largest share of respondents again place their fully vaccinated rate in the 50 to 69 percent category (+6.9).

So, while there has been some positive movement, the overall picture hasn't really changed since earlier this year. This tells us that vaccine hesitancy and resistance remains strong, which may present significant challenges for hospital leadership with a federal vaccination mandate on the horizon.

## Hospital-Mandated Vaccination Fails to Take Hold in Rural Areas

Nationally, approximately 41 percent of all hospitals have implemented COVID vaccination mandates for staff.<sup>3</sup> Within rural areas, however, the push for mandates is markedly different. Three quarters of our survey respondents (74.9 percent) indicated that their facility (or parent health system) *has not* mandated vaccination for healthcare personnel, while 13.1 percent said that their hospital has a mandate in place and another 11.5 percent have a mandate that has yet to take effect.

State-specific laws prohibiting vaccination mandates are likely playing a role here as hospitals await the implementation of a federal mandate. In facilities mandating vaccination, 12.3 percent of our survey respondents indicated the loss of 1 to 5 percent of their nursing staff.

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## Staffing Shortages are Beginning to Impact Access to Care

Nearly all our survey respondents (98.5 percent) reported that they are experiencing a staffing shortage. Although the recruitment and retention of staff isn't a new challenge for rural providers, the pandemic has exacerbated this issue. Asked to identify which roles are proving to be the most difficult to fill, more than 95 percent (96.2 percent) of respondents selected nursing. Ancillary services-related positions was rated second highest (66.2 percent), followed by facilities (28.5 percent).

Pandemic burnout and retirement are significant factors in the current nursing crunch, but so too is the opportunity to move to a more financially lucrative position at another hospital. In our survey, 41.5 percent of respondents said better paying jobs was the No. 1 reason behind nursing departures this year.

Nursing staff shortages are beginning to have a real impact on rural hospitals' ability to provide services. Nearly half of respondents indicated that a lack of nurse staffing has prevented their hospital from admitting patients in the last 60 days. Additionally, nearly 30 percent (26.9 percent) of respondents said that nurse staffing-related issues have resulted in the suspension of services, and another 21.5 percent indicated that is something that is being considered.

Of the respondents who indicated that their facility has put a service suspension into place, 48 percent said it is surgery related (e.g., inpatient/outpatient, elective, specialty). Access to services is already a significant barrier for rural communities, and the pandemic's impact on staffing — particularly nursing — threatens to amplify this issue for communities that are already vulnerable.

## Piecing Together What the Future Holds for Rural Hospitals

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the hospitals that serve rural communities. In many instances, the pandemic is exacerbating factors that have helped fuel the rural hospital closure and vulnerability crisis. Vaccine hesitancy and resistance — not just among hospital staff but with rural communities as well — all but ensures that COVID will linger in rural communities and force facilities to adopt dual modes of care for the foreseeable future. Providing care, however, requires sufficient staff, and the staffing shortages as well as burnout that have spread across rural healthcare bare close watching, particularly as a federal vaccine mandate looms.

## SOURCES

1. The Daily Yonder, [COVID-19 Dashboard for Rural America](#), October 27, 2021
2. Survey conducted September 21 to October 15, 2021 in partnership with the National Rural Health Association
3. The PEW Charitable Trusts, Stateline, ["Biden's Vaccine Mandate Could Further Strain Rural Hospitals,"](#) October 21, 2021

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