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ALLIED HEALTH WORKER SHORTAGE STRAINS COMMUNITY CLINICS

Eight in 10 Report Staffing Challenge; Clinics Struggle to Bridge Gaps

SAN FRANCISCO — Findings from a new survey of community clinics in California show that the shortage among allied health workers is putting a great strain on these nonprofit health organizations. This shortage is causing a number of problems such as an overworked staff and limitations on the clinic's ability to serve more patients.

"Community clinics represent the front lines of our health care system," said Carmela Castellano-Garcia, president and CEO of the California Primary Care Association, a membership organization of over 700 not-for-profit community clinics and health centers in the state. "The economic situation is putting a further strain on our collective safety net and community clinics are working to meet this demand under very challenging circumstances. Retaining qualified workers, particularly in the allied health professions, is but one of the challenges many of our clinics face."

More than eight in 10 clinics reported challenges in keeping allied health positions filled with qualified, trained personnel. Positions such as licensed vocational nurses, dental assistants and case managers are among the hardest to keep staffed. The allied health sector represents over 200 positions in California that provide a range of diagnostic, technical and therapeutic direct patient care and support services. Many include entry-level occupations requiring minimal educational investment such as a certificate training program or an associate degree.

The scarcity is causing clinics to take on various measures to bridge the gap. More than half (55 percent) of surveyed clinics reported having hired temporary workers or outsourced their work as a result of this workforce shortage, while 72 percent have had to increase overtime for existing staff.

Many clinics are finding innovative solutions to the challenge. Almost 70 percent are partnering with local training programs to provide clinical training sites, a popular practice among health care providers that helps increase the pool of trained health workers. The survey also polled clinics on policy recommendations to help increase the number of allied health workers in California. Of these proposals, most clinics favored increasing the number of allied health training programs and expanding loan forgiveness programs for health workers across California.

Specific findings from the survey include:

- Eighty-one percent of clinics reported that keeping allied health positions filled with qualified, trained personnel is a challenge.
- For clinics that hire such positions, 76 percent of clinics reported difficulties hiring licensed vocational nurses (LVNs). Case managers (56 percent) and dental assistants (50 percent) were also cited as difficult positions to fill.
- Of the problems resulting from an allied health worker shortage, overworked staff was the most serious problem (60 percent). Clinics also cited decreased productivity for existing staff (59 percent), too much staff time required to recruit and train staff (58 percent), and a limited ability to serve more patients (57 percent) as serious problems.
- Over 70 percent of clinics reported increasing overtime for existing staff (72 percent) as a way to deal with this shortage, and 55 percent have hired temporary workers or contracted services to an off-site provider.

This research was conducted via an online survey of 108 California community clinics between Nov. 25 and Dec. 8, 2008 by Goodwin Simon Victoria Research. This survey was funded by a grant to Fenton Communications from The California Wellness Foundation.

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