



NEW SURVEY: Over 70 Percent of Community Health Centers Face Critical Staff Shortages Amid Rising Demand for Care and Limited Resources

Despite Severe Challenges, Community Health Centers Deliver High-Quality, Accessible Care to Millions of Americans with Low Income

Community health centers (CHCs), the backbone of America's health care safety net, report worsening workforce shortages, a new Commonwealth Fund survey finds. In 2024, more than 70 percent of CHCs have reported primary care physician, nurse, or mental health professional shortages.

The survey also shows that, despite many challenges — including rising mental health and substance use treatment needs, changes in Medicaid enrollment, and persistent funding gaps — CHCs have continued to provide accessible, comprehensive, and coordinated health care to more than 30 million patients annually. Of these, 20 million are people with low income, 17 million are people of color, 15 million are people covered by Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, and nearly 16 million are uninsured.

Also known as federally qualified health centers, CHCs are community-based outpatient clinics that provide an array of services. They're supported through a combination of federal funding, Medicaid reimbursement, and other revenues. At the time of the survey, 1,368 centers were operating in more than 15,000 service areas.

The 2024 Commonwealth Fund Survey of Federally Qualified Health Centers engaged nearly 740 CHC leaders nationally to assess the extent to which CHCs achieve the core functions of primary care — accessibility, comprehensiveness, and coordination — and the barriers they face in doing so. It also explores how care delivery has changed since 2018, when the survey was last conducted.

Other key findings include:

- **Timely appointments and flexible hours:** Nearly all community health centers offer timely appointments (88%) and expanded hours for patients to receive care (93%).

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The Commonwealth Fund is a private, nonprofit foundation supporting independent research on health policy reform and a high-performance health system.

- **Rising telehealth:** The availability of telehealth services through CHCs has skyrocketed since 2018, rising from 24 percent to 96 percent in 2024. Sixty-one percent of CHCs report that telehealth has improved patients' access to specialty care.
- **More substance use treatment:** Significantly more CHCs offer substance use disorder treatment (66%) and medication-assisted treatment (62%) in 2024 compared to 2018 (54% and 37%, respectively).
- **Screening for social needs:** Significantly more CHCs reported screening patients for unmet social and economic needs. Overall, 67 percent of CHCs reported screening all patients for unmet social needs in 2024, compared to 40 percent in 2018.
- **Challenges in coordinating with specialists:** Most CHCs struggle to obtain specialty care appointments for their patients (73%), particularly for those covered by Medicaid or those lacking insurance.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The challenges facing CHCs — workforce shortages, thin financial margins, and coordinating care with other providers — threaten their ability to continue providing high-quality care. But there are policies that could, if enacted by Congress, better support CHCs:

- **Reauthorize and expand the Community Health Center Fund.** This key source of federal funding is set to expire at the end of 2024. Congress could reauthorize multiyear funding for the program and increase the amount of funding.
- **Address growing workforce shortages.** Congress could take steps to expand recruitment, retention, and training programs that encourage providers to practice in medically underserved areas, including rural communities.
- **Ensure that CHCs have sufficient resources to continue offering telehealth.** This can be done by aligning telehealth reimbursement more closely with reimbursement for in-person care. Congress can extend federal flexibilities that enabled CHCs to expand telehealth use during the pandemic, such as higher payment rates, which are set to expire at the end of 2024.

The full report will be available after the embargo lifts at:

<https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2024/aug/community-health-centers-meeting-primary-care-needs-2024-FQHC-survey>

FROM THE EXPERTS:

Celli Horstman, lead study author and Commonwealth Fund Senior Research Associate for Delivery System Reform

“In a health system that fails on so many levels, community health centers are a bright spot. If you don’t have insurance, if you can’t afford health care, or if there are no other providers where you live, community health centers are there for you. They are an essential lifeline for millions of Americans who otherwise might not be able to get care, and they deserve to be supported.”

Joseph R. Betancourt, M.D., Commonwealth Fund President

“Community health centers provide essential health care services to more than 30 million people every year. They operate under enormous pressure because of inadequate funding, growing workforce shortages, and increasing demand for their services. Despite these obstacles, these centers continue to deliver timely, high-quality care. Securing funding for community health centers will ensure they have sufficient resources to continue doing their critical work — serving anyone who walks through their doors, regardless of ability to pay.”

HOW WE CONDUCTED THIS STUDY

2024 Survey

The Commonwealth Fund 2024 National Survey of Federally Qualified Health Centers was conducted by SSRS from October 17, 2023, through April 2, 2024, among a nationally representative sample of executive directors, clinical directors, or project directors at federally qualified health centers (FQHCs). The survey sample was drawn from the Uniformed Data System (UDS) list of all FQHCs in 2022 that have at least one site that is a community-based primary care clinic. The National Association of Community Health Centers provided the list.

All 1,368 FQHCs were sent the questionnaire and 766 responded, yielding a response rate of 56 percent. The researchers were unable to determine the geography of 29 centers, and their responses are excluded from this analysis. The survey consisted of a 12-page questionnaire, informed by the Commonwealth Fund 2018 National Survey of Federally Qualified Health Centers and qualitative research conducted by the African American Research Collaborative. The questionnaire could be completed by mail or online. Data were weighted by the number of patients, number of sites, geographic region, and urban/rural location to reflect the universe of FQHCs as accurately as possible. The researchers used chi-square tests to assess differences between health centers in rural and urban areas, as well as between 2018 and 2024 responses.

2018 Survey

The Commonwealth Fund 2018 National Survey of Federally Qualified Health Centers was conducted by SSRS from May 16, 2018, through September 30, 2018, among a nationally representative sample of 694 executive directors or clinical directors at FQHCs. The survey sample was drawn from the Uniformed Data System (UDS) list of all FQHCs in 2016 that have at least one site that is a community-based primary care clinic. The National Association of Community Health Centers provided the list.

All 1,367 FQHCs were sent the questionnaire and 694 responded, yielding a response rate of 51 percent. The survey consisted of a 12-page questionnaire that took approximately 20 to 25 minutes to complete. Data were weighted by number of patients, number of sites, geographic region, and urban/rural location to reflect the universe of primary care community centers as accurately as possible. Expansion status was determined using the FQHC-reported largest site address. If the largest site address was not provided, and the FQHC had only one site, UDS data were used to determine the health center's geography. Chi-square testing identified differences between health centers in rural and urban areas.

ADDITIONAL PERTINENT RESEARCH

[How Community Health Centers Can Meet the Rising Demand for Behavioral Health Care](#)

[How U.S. Health Care Providers Are Addressing the Drivers of Health](#)

[Federally Qualified Health Centers Can Make the Switch to Value-Based Payment, But Need Assistance](#)

[Community Health Centers Seek to Prepare Medicaid Beneficiaries, and Themselves, for the Risks Ahead](#)
