

## Recently Published Findings in Medical Care Research and Review

# Frontline Workers' Career Pathways: A Detailed Look at Washington State's Medical Assistant Workforce

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## BACKGROUND

Medical assistants (MAs) are key members of the healthcare team, with expanding roles in office and clinic-based health care settings, and in 2015 there were 500,000 to 600,000 employed MAs in the U.S. MAs are listed among the 20 fastest-growing occupations in the nation, fueled by increasing demand for primary care services and mounting pressure to reduce healthcare costs through task shifting to lower-cost providers. In Washington, the only state to credential MAs, employers report that recruiting and maintaining a qualified MA workforce is difficult despite a relatively large number of MAs relative to demand. Understanding how MAs' backgrounds and education pathways align with their job settings and roles, as well as their attitudes and perceptions about career pathway opportunities, is important for developing effective recruitment and retention strategies for MAs and other frontline workers who provide routine but essential services across healthcare settings. This study used original survey data to examine the characteristics and roles of a defined MA workforce and the relationship to MAs' career pathways.

## METHODS

We collected survey responses from a representative sample of 3,355 of Washington's MAs with certified status (MA-Cs) to understand their demographic, education and employment backgrounds; job satisfaction; and career plans. We calculated descriptive statistics on survey topics, and conducted logistic regression analyses to predict whether MA-Cs agreed with the statement "I plan to seek training and/or employment in another healthcare occupation in the next five years". Regression models controlled for demographic variables including age, sex, race, and household composition; labor market variables including hourly wage rate, weekly work hours, and years of experience working as an MA; the nine healthcare planning regions within the state; MA education (for-profit vs. not-for-profit); whether the MA felt overwhelmed by their workload; and whether the MA was satisfied with opportunities for promotion.

## KEY FINDINGS

The following were key study findings:

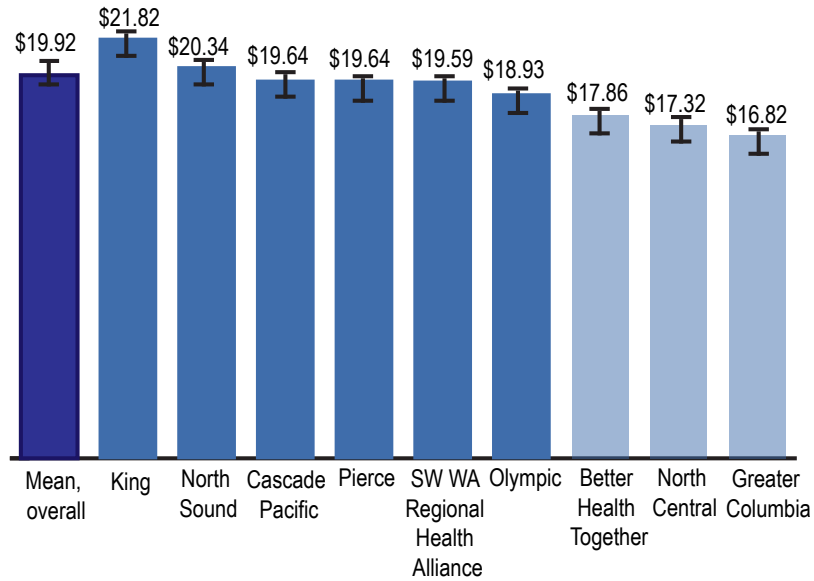
- Washington's MA-Cs had a mean average wage of \$19.91, varying across state regions from \$16.93 to \$21.73, with relatively little variation within each region (Figure 1).
- 93.0% of the state's MA-Cs were female, and higher percentages were Hispanic, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and more than one race compared with the overall Washington population.
- Most (88.8%) reported their work location as a medical clinic, and primary care/family medicine was the medical focus of one third of MA-Cs' primary work setting. Many other medical specialties were selected at low frequencies, including by MA-Cs who indicated working as "floats" across multiple specialties.
- While generally satisfied, 56.2% indicated they would seek training or employment in another healthcare occupation within five years, with higher percentages among MA-Cs who felt overwhelmed by their workload and/or not satisfied with promotion opportunities (Figure 2).
- Regression analyses showed Hispanic, Black and Asian MA-Cs were more likely than White MA-Cs to express interest in other healthcare careers.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Studying Washington's MA-Cs provides insights about how to retain this growing and diverse occupation on which ambulatory care is increasingly dependent. The state's MA workforce, as a study population, is relatively consistent in terms of practice and education/training characteristics because of the state's credentialing requirements and specification of MAs' scope of practice.

MA recruitment and turnover is expensive and disruptive for employers and patients. The implications of this study's findings for health policy and practice include that employers may continue to experience high MA turnover unless their career advancement opportunities, workload management and salary progression are addressed. As healthcare strives for a stable and diverse workforce, strengthening MA career pathways to retain qualified workers is a strategy that should reward employers as well as the MA workforce itself.

**Figure 1. Mean hourly wage\* of MA-Cs statewide, overall and by health planning region\*\***

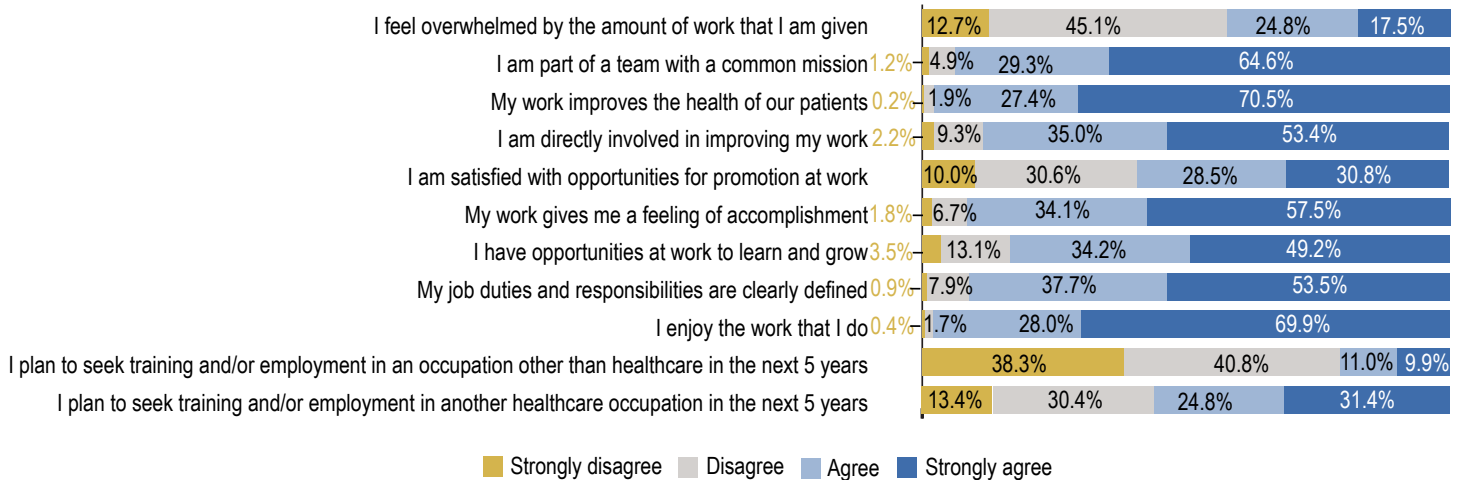


Number of responses by region: Overall 2,509, King 848, North Sound 403, Cascade Pacific Action Alliance 185, Pierce 194, SW WA Regional Health Alliance 156, Olympic 144, Better Health Together 247, North Central 77, Greater Columbia 255.

\* Two standard deviations indicated by error bars

\*\*Regions in western Washington shown in medium blue, regions in eastern Washington shown in light blue

**Figure 2. MA-Cs' level of agreement with career and job-related statements**



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## REFERENCE TO PUBLISHED FINDINGS

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