

Health jobs boom in Fresno, but many are low-skill, low-wage

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By Tim Sheehan



Nursing staff member Deandra Boughton in the new addition to Children's Hospital Central California's Pediatric Intensive Care unit, which features larger rooms, right.

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In the San Joaquin Valley and across the country, the health care industry is generating a growing number of jobs for workers who don't have a four-year college degree.

But a report issued Thursday by the [Brookings Institution](#) suggests that while the number of those health jobs is rising faster in Fresno than in most of the nation, the region's below-average educational attainment tends to trap many health care workers in low-skill, low-wage jobs with fewer opportunities to climb a career ladder.

The study by the Washington, D.C.-based think tank, based on three-year Census data and other information from 2009 to 2011, reported that in the Fresno metropolitan region, almost 21,000 people who lack a bachelor's degree worked in the 10 largest health occupations for which no four-year degree is required. Those include personal care aides, nursing and home health aides, medical and dental assistants, licensed vocational and practical nurses, paramedics and emergency medical technicians,

laboratory or diagnostic technologists and technicians, and registered nurses with associate degrees.

Collectively, those non-bachelor's workers represent about 58% of all health care workers in the Fresno area -- the fifth-highest proportion of non-bachelor's health workers among the 100 largest metropolitan areas of the U.S.

Joining Fresno in the top five are two other San Joaquin Valley communities: second-ranked Modesto, where the non-bachelor's workers in the 10 occupations make up 63% of all health care workers, and Stockton, ranked third with a share of 60%.

"The metro areas that have the highest share of pre-baccalaureate workers tend to have lower educational attainment levels overall," said Martha Ross, a Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program fellow and the lead author of the report. "One thing that's notable about Fresno is that there has been a growth of about 15.7% in all pre-baccalaureate workers since 2000, and that compares to a national average growth of only about 3% among the 100 largest metro areas."

"Fresno is getting a larger influx of lower-educated workers" than most communities, Ross added. "Your economic development people would probably rather have a large influx of more-educated workers."

The rise in the number of lower-educated workers in health care in Fresno has been even more dramatic. Since 2000, non-bachelor's workers in the 10 occupations included in the Brookings study grew by about 80% in Fresno -- the eighth-largest increase among large metro areas nationwide. In those 100 cities, the collective average increase in non-bachelor's workers was about 46%.

Harry G. Harris, the president of a Fresno-based home-health agency, said he's not surprised by the findings in the Brookings study. His company, HealthCare California, provides nurses and health aides through doctor referrals to extend medical care for patients in their homes, often following a hospital stay.

The need for workers in the pre-bachelor fields will only grow in years to come, Harris said -- not only as more people enroll in medical insurance through the Affordable Care Act, but as the entire population ages and adds to demand for health services.

Harris said he would like to see high school programs to help train workers for lower-level health jobs for which no college degree is needed. "You don't have to go to college to be a plumber," he said. "We need apprenticeship training in health services."

The Brookings data indicates that there are more than 6,000 health workers with four-year college degrees working in the 10 non-bachelor's occupations in the Fresno area. Most of those -- about 4,700 -- are registered nurses who have at least a bachelor of science degree in nursing, where a higher degree can translate to more responsibility and higher pay. But another likely factor is the displacement of workers from higher-paying jobs during the recession who have been forced to take low-level jobs.

Salaries range wildly among the occupations that don't require a four-year degree. The median earnings for registered nurses who have an associate degree and work full-time throughout the year in the Fresno area was \$80,000 a year -- fifth-highest among the nation's large metro areas.

But on the other end of the scale, the median full-time, year-round salary for personal care aides -- who account for almost 7,000 of the non-bachelor's workers in the Fresno area -- was \$19,400 a year. And, the report notes, less than 38% of those aides work full-time or year-round.

Overall, across the 10 health occupations detailed in the Brookings study, the median full-time salary for pre-bachelor's workers in the Fresno region was about \$29,000 -- lower than 94 of the large U.S. metro areas.

"Earnings in some occupations are low enough to place sizable shares of workers in the working poor category," with an annual household income that's less than 200% of the federal poverty line, the report states. In the Fresno area, that adds up to about 36% of non-bachelor's health workers. The poverty line varies according to the number of people in a household, but in 2011 it was calculated at less than \$23,000 for a family of four.

"One could argue that the reason we have a larger percentage of lower-paying home health aides or personal care aides is because ... it's more feasible that workers at that salary range can live here" than in other parts of the state, said Blake Konczal, executive director of the Fresno Workforce Investment Board.

Ross said a major challenge facing the health industry is creating career ladders through which lower-level workers can advance in their work.

"There are so many jobs at so many levels," Ross said. "In theory, there is a stairstep approach to advancement. But in practice, it's much harder to realize.

"It depends on a person's academic skill levels and attainment going in," she added. "If you don't have a high school diploma, and you have low reading and math skills, an 18-month LPN (licensed practical nurse) course is going to be a challenge."

For workers who lack the formal education but have the reading and math skills to succeed, the time it takes to take additional training classes or degree programs poses another obstacle.

Konczal acknowledged that "there are clear relationships between education attainment and reward -- either promotion or remuneration or both." But he added that he believes there are opportunities for advancement -- a career "lattice" rather than a "ladder" -- "once they get their toe in the door."

"This does not mean that home-health aides are, on average, going to become brain surgeons," he said, "but it does mean that incremental progress is possible, and actually probable for committed workers."

Still, with pressure increasing to improve the quality of care while containing costs, Ross said the health care industry faces a challenge of training workers who lack four-year degrees to take on added, but still routine, responsibilities including paperwork, monitoring vital signs and patient education. That can free up doctors and RNs -- the more skilled members of the health care team -- from mundane tasks to focus on more intensive care.

"It's a huge culture shift, it really is," Ross said.

"These pre-baccalaureate workers are an underutilized resource," Ross added. "Even with the advent of technology, this is a labor-intensive field."

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No degree required

Number of people in the Fresno metropolitan area without a bachelor's degree working in health care occupations for which a 4-year college degree is not required

Occupation	Workers without bachelor degrees	Median earnings (full-time, full-year)
Personal care aides	6,937	\$19,400
Nursing, psychiatric and home health aides	5,067	\$24,000
Registered nurses	2,621	\$80,000
Health practitioner support technologists/technicians	1,498	\$37,400
Medical assistants	1,420	\$33,000
Dental assistants	1,151	\$25,000
Licensed practical or vocational nurses	702	\$35,000
Emergency medical technicians and paramedics	436	\$50,000
Diagnostic-related technologists/technicians	404	\$54,000
Clinical laboratory technologists/technicians	397	\$38,000
Summary (10 occupations)	20,633	\$29,000

Source: Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, based on U.S. Census Bureau data 2009-2011

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