

Health Workforce Projections: Healthcare Support Occupations

KEY FINDING

Between 2012 and 2025:

- All five healthcare occupations presented in this fact sheet will experience an increase in demand.
- Demand will grow by 20 percent for respiratory therapy technicians, 17 percent for pharmacy technicians, 17 percent for pharmacy aides, 23 percent for occupational therapy assistants and 24 percent for physical therapy assistants.

This fact sheet presents the national demand for select healthcare support occupations for 2012 through 2025 using HRSA’s Health Workforce Simulation Model (HWSM).¹ Supply projections are not included due to lack of sufficient data to provide reliable estimates of future supply. Occupations discussed in this fact sheet include respiratory therapy technicians, pharmacy technicians, pharmacy aides, occupational therapy assistants and physical therapy assistants. While the nuances of modeling demand differ for individual health professions, the basic framework within the HWSM remains the same. The HWSM assumes that demand equals supply in the base year. For demand modeling, the major components include population demographics, health care use patterns (including the influence of the Affordable Care Act health care coverage), and demand for health care providers (translated into Full-Time Equivalents). Over the period studied, the model assumes that current national patterns of service demand remain unchanged within each demographic group.² These projections do not account for the geographical distribution of providers which may impact access to care in certain communities.

BACKGROUND

Five healthcare support occupations are discussed in this brief: respiratory therapy technicians, pharmacy technicians, pharmacy aides, occupational therapy assistants, and physical therapy assistants. Respiratory therapy technicians assist respiratory therapists and physicians and provide medical treatment to patients with breathing and cardiopulmonary problems such as asthma or emphysema. Under the direction of other health professionals, they can also provide medical aid to adults that have lungs problems or babies with undeveloped lungs. Respiratory therapy technicians require an associate’s degree and need to be registered.

Pharmacy technicians help licensed pharmacists dispense prescription medication. They generally have a high school diploma and learn through on the job training. Pharmacy technicians are regulated in many states. Pharmacy aides perform administrative and customer services tasks in a pharmacy such as recording drug inventory and filing prescriptions, and have no formal education requirements.

Occupational therapy assistants have direct involvement in providing therapy to patients and work under the direction of occupational therapists. Occupational therapy assistants must have an associate’s degree and may be certified. In most states, occupational therapy assistants must be licensed. Physical therapist assistants work under

¹ This model uses a micro-simulation approach where supply is projected based on the simulation of career choices of individual health workers. Demand for health care services is simulated for a representative sample of the current and future U.S. population based on each person’s demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, health-related behavior, and health risk factors that affect their health care utilization patterns. For more information on data and methods, please see [BHW HRSA Health Workforce Supply and Demand Simulation Model](#).

² Ono T, Lafortune G, Schoenstein M. “Health workforce planning in OECD countries: a review of 26 projection models from 18 countries.” *OECD Health Working Papers, No. 62*. France: OECD Publishing; 2013:8-11.

the direction and supervision of physical therapists, implementing components of patient care plans, helping obtain outcomes data from physical therapy interventions, and modifying therapies to progress the patient or to ensure patient comfort and safety. Physical therapist assistants must have an associate degree, and many states require licensure.

FINDINGS

There were approximately 13,500 respiratory therapy technicians, 334,400 pharmacy technicians, 42,600 pharmacy aides, 29,500 occupational therapy assistants and 76,500 physical therapy assistants nationally in 2012. Demand for both pharmacy technicians and aides is projected to grow 17 percent between 2012 and 2025 (Exhibit 1). During this same time period, demand for respiratory therapy technicians is projected to increase by 20 percent and occupational therapy assistants by 23 percent. Physical therapy assistants are expected to see the most growth in demand at 24 percent.

Exhibit 1. Estimated Demand for Selected Health Support Occupations in the U.S., 2012 – 2025

	Respiratory therapy technicians	Pharmacy technicians	Pharmacy aides	Occupational therapy assistants	Physical therapy assistants
<i>Demand</i>					
Estimated demand, 2012	13,500	334,400	42,600	29,500	76,500
Total demand growth, 2012-2025:	2,700 (20%)	54,600 (17%)	7,200 (17%)	6,900 (23%)	18,400 (24%)
Changing demographics impact	2,500	45,900	6,000	6,600	17,300
ACA insurance coverage impact	200	8,700	1,200	300	1,100
Projected demand, 2025	16,200	389,000	49,800	36,400	94,900

Factors that influence demand are integrated into the HWSM, including the aging and growth of the U.S. population and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. The growing elderly population will lead to increased incidence of illness and chronic conditions and greater demand for health care as well as pharmacy services. The Affordable Care Act's emphasis on wellness and prevention will lead to increased use of health resources (impacting all health care occupations overall), and the increase in the number of Americans with prescription drug coverage will lead to increased use in pharmacy services (impacting primarily the pharmacy occupations). Together, these two factors suggest that demand for pharmacy, respiratory, occupational, and physical therapy services will remain high.

[About the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis](#)

The National Center for Health Workforce Analysis informs public and private-sector decision-making related to the health workforce by expanding and improving health workforce data, disseminating workforce data to the public, and improving and updating projections of the supply and demand for health workers. For more information about the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis please visit our website at bhw.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/.