HRSA
Health Workforce

Long-Term Services and Support: Demand Projections, 2021-2036
October 2023

This brief contains highlights of workforce projections for occupations based in long-term services and support (LTSS) in the United States. These include direct care workers (such as nursing assistants, home health aides, and personal care aides) as well as physical therapists, occupational therapists and social workers working in long-term care settings.

These projections were generated using HRSA's Health Workforce Simulation Model (HWSM) and start with the year 2021 and go through 2036. Full data on the workforce projections are available in the Workforce Projections Dashboard.

Key Results and Takeaways

- Forecasting future supply of the LTSS workforce is complicated for several reasons, including low barriers to entry and exit and the presence of unpaid or informal caregivers (such as family members).[1] As a result, future supply projections are not provided.

- Nationally, the overall demand for workers in LTSS settings modeled is projected to grow by 42% between 2021 and 2036, from 1.88 million full-time equivalent (FTE)[2] LTSS professionals to 2.67 million. Growth in demand varies across the professions, ranging from 34% for occupational therapists in LTSS settings, to 135% for psychiatric aides in LTSS settings. Growth in the demand for these services and support is driven by the aging population and increasing longevity.

- Direct care workers – including home health aides, personal care aides, nursing assistants and psychiatric aides – make up the largest segment of the LTSS workforce. Demand for direct care workers is projected to grow by 41% in 2036 (see **Exhibit 1**).

- Among direct care workers, demand for psychiatric aides is projected to grow the fastest (135%), followed by nursing assistants (44%), personal care aides (40%), and home health aides (38%). In contrast, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that employment of home health and personal care aides will grow by just 22% over the next decade (2022-2032), which may indicate that supply is growing slower than demand.[3]

- Among all other LTSS occupations, demand for social workers is projected to grow the fastest (121%) followed by recreational therapists (47%) and dietitians and nutritionists (46%).

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[1] For more information, see the HWSM technical documentation.
[2] An FTE is defined as working 40 hours per week.
[3] U.S. Bureau of Labor Services, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2022. Accessed on September 20, 2023.

Exhibit 1a – Projected national demand for LTSS occupations: Direct care workers

Occupation	2021	2026	2031	2036	Percent Change (2021-36)
Home Health Aides	411,900	464,930	517,620	566,950	38%
Personal Care Aides	602,920	675,340	755,540	841,130	40%
Nursing Assistants	694,260	784,070	887,340	1,000,590	44%
Psychiatric Aides	4,350	5,860	7,800	10,230	135%
All Direct Care Workers	*1,713,430*	*1,930,200*	*2,168,300*	*2,418,900*	*41%*

Exhibit 1b – Projected national demand for LTSS occupations: Other LTSS occupations

Occupation	2021	2026	2031	2036	Percent Change (2021-36)
Dietitians and Nutritionists	9,660	10,920	12,410	14,100	46%
Occupational Therapists	27,890	30,630	33,800	37,270	34%
Occupational Therapy Assistants	11,330	12,480	13,810	15,270	35%
Physical Therapist Assistants	15,560	17,430	19,370	21,300	37%
Physical Therapists	46,360	52,110	58,190	64,320	39%
Recreational Therapists	5,290	6,000	6,840	7,800	47%
Social Workers	24,050	31,810	41,440	53,220	121%
Speech-Language Pathologists	25,310	28,250	31,530	35,020	38%
All Other Occupations in LTSS	**165,450**	**189,630**	**217,390**	**248,300**	*50%*
Total LTSS Workforce	**1,878,880**	**2,119,830**	**2,385,690**	**2,667,200**	**42%**

Notes: Demand projections are in full-time equivalents (FTEs), defined as working 40 hours a week.

- Note, the above results assume a continuation of current trends in the key drivers of demand and care utilization over the projection period. If, instead, we assume that reductions in the barriers to access for underserved populations increase the use of long-term care services delivered in ambulatory and hospital settings, as well as home health care, there would be a further increase in the demand for LTSS providers in these settings. [4]

  For example, if residents of nonmetro areas utilized home health services at the same rate as residents in metro areas, the demand for home health aides would be higher in each year during the projection period. In fact, by 2036 the demand for home health aides is expected to exceed the initial projected figure for 2036 by an additional 7,330 FTEs. [5]

These projections were generated using some data from the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic impacted the population seeking care, the workforce providing care, and the data available for both. These projections should be interpreted with caution as the behavior of those seeking care and

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[4] Because many LTSS services in residential facilities are covered by Medicaid and Medicare, this scenario is only estimated for ambulatory, hospital, and home healthcare settings. See the HWSM technical documentation for further information.
[5] NCHWA also reports projections under alternative demand scenarios, such as expanded insurance coverage and improved access to care. The projected estimates under each scenario can be accessed in the Workforce Projections Dashboard.

the size and composition of the workforce providing care during the pandemic may not be fully reflected in these projections. See the HWSM technical documentation for details on the methodology and datasets used to generate these projections.

For full data on the workforce projections, see the Workforce Projections Dashboard. You can access a webinar about the Workforce Projections Dashboard that shows how to use it. You can also download the data from the dashboard in spreadsheet form.