

The background of the cover features a photograph of a healthcare setting. In the foreground, a woman with grey hair, wearing a white lab coat and a stethoscope, looks directly at the camera with a slight smile. In the background, a male doctor in a white lab coat and stethoscope is attending to a female patient lying in a hospital bed. The patient is wearing a light blue hospital gown. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a clean, modern clinical environment. The image is overlaid with a geometric design of overlapping triangles in shades of blue, teal, and green.

**2022
SURVEY OF
LOCUM TENENS
STAFFING TRENDS:
MOVING TOWARD
A MORE FLEXIBLE
PHYSICIAN
WORKFORCE**

AMNHealthcare.com



About AMN Healthcare

AMN Healthcare's locum tenens staffing solutions (formerly Staff Care) specializes in matching locum tenens physicians, physician assistants (PAs), nurse practitioners (NPs), certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs), and dentists with hospitals, medical groups, government facilities, Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and other healthcare organizations nationwide. Established in 1992 as Staff Care, AMN Healthcare's locum tenens staffing solutions is proud to be certified by the Joint Commission and by the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA).

About Locum Tenens

The practice of one physician filling in for another who is temporarily absent from his or her practice is time-honored in the medical profession. Known as locum tenens (Latin for "to take the place of"), temporary physicians have traditionally filled in for colleagues who are ill, travelling or otherwise away from their practices as a professional courtesy.

It was not until the 1970s that the use of locum tenens physicians expanded from limited, ad hoc assignments arranged by physicians themselves to a more broad-based and systematic component of medical staffing. Government grants allotted to make physicians available in medically underserved areas ushered in the modern era of locum tenens staffing, which now is a multi-billion dollar industry.

Today, hospitals, medical groups, FQHCs, and many other facilities use locum tenens physicians for a variety of reasons, while at the same time a growing number of physicians are choosing to work on a locum tenens basis. Healthcare facilities also use locum tenens PAs, NPs, CRNAs and dentists. Through its Center for Research, AMN Healthcare periodically conducts surveys to track trends in locum tenens staffing, both among healthcare facilities that use locum tenens providers and among providers who choose to work locum tenens assignments.

This report marks AMN Healthcare/Staff Care's 15th *Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends*. Survey data may be useful to physicians, healthcare executives, policy makers, academics, journalists and others who monitor developments in the healthcare staffing industry.

Methodology

AMN Healthcare's 2022 *Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends* is based on surveys sent by e-mail to healthcare executives/managers at hospitals, medical groups, FQHCs and other healthcare facilities nationwide during the months of February and March of 2022. Healthcare executives completing the survey were asked to comment about their locum tenens staffing experience over the prior 12 months. Survey results are based on responses received from 202 healthcare facility executives/managers. Data from past AMN Healthcare/Staff Care surveys are included where applicable.

Margin of Error. Given the disparate types of facilities the survey was sent to, margin of error for the survey was not calculated, and survey responses are meant to reflect general trends in locum tenens staffing and may not mirror the experiences of all healthcare facilities.

The final survey report was released in May, 2022.



Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends

Number of Surveys Completed: 202

Key Findings

AMN Healthcare's 2022 *Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends* examines the use of locum tenens physicians and other providers in hospital, medical group, FQHC, and other settings. It seeks to determine the prevalence of locum tenens use in healthcare facilities and the reasons why facilities use locum tenens physicians and other healthcare professionals. The survey also examines how health facility administrators evaluate the quality of care provided by locum tenens healthcare professionals and whether or not they are worth the cost.

- The majority of healthcare facilities (88%) used locum tenens physicians or other locum tenens providers sometime during the last 12 months.
- The primary reason healthcare facilities use locum tenens physicians and other providers is to address staff shortages. Seventy percent of those surveyed said they use locum tenens providers to maintain services while they seek to fill openings in their permanent staffs.
- Anesthesia providers, including anesthesiologists and CRNAs, were the most utilized type of locum tenens professionals over the last year. Twenty-eight percent of healthcare facility managers said their facilities had used locum anesthesiology providers in the prior 12 months, underscoring how the number of medical procedures requiring anesthesia has rebounded from COVID-19 related lows.
- Hospitalists were the second most utilized type of locum tenens provider over the last year. Twenty-five percent of healthcare facility managers said their facilities had used locum tenens hospitalists over the prior 12 months, a result of increased hospital inpatient work volumes caused by COVID-19.
- Behavioral health specialists, including psychiatrists, were the third most utilized type of locum tenens provider over the last year. Twenty-three percent of those surveyed said their facilities had used locum tenens behavioral health specialists over the prior 12 months, suggesting that a nationwide shortage of psychiatrists and other behavioral health specialists continues and may be exacerbated by COVID-19.

- Locum tenens primary care physicians, including family medicine physicians, internal medicine physicians and pediatricians were used by 21% of facilities in the prior 12 months. An additional 20% used locum tenens NPs, while 12% used locum tenens PAs, who also often provide primary care, indicating that more primary care work is shifting from physicians to NPs and PAs.
- Locum tenens surgical and diagnostic physicians also were utilized last year. Fifteen percent of those surveyed used locum tenens surgeons in the last 12 months, while 15% used locum tenens internal medicine subspecialists.
- Forty-seven percent of healthcare facilities currently are seeking locum tenens physicians and other providers, indicating that approximately one half of healthcare facilities are seeking locum tenens providers at any given time.
- Locum tenens physicians have been a resource during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty-seven percent of those surveyed used locum tenens physicians to treat COVID-19 patients. Of these, 58% said locum tenens physicians have been very important or extremely important in treating COVID-19 patients.
- Sixty-two percent of health facility managers rate the skill level of locum tenens physicians as excellent or good, 34% rate the skill level of locum tenens physicians as adequate, while 4% rate the skill level of locum tenens physicians as poor.
- The majority of healthcare managers (70%) rate locum tenens physicians as worth the cost.
- In order to address staffing shortages, the majority of healthcare facilities (54%) are adding new incentives such as signing bonuses, 49% are implementing new retention strategies such as retention bonuses, 43% are hiring additional temporary staff and 35% are expanding telehealth services.
- Some healthcare facilities are cutting back services to address staffing shortages. Eighteen percent are reducing hours of service in some areas, 14% are canceling elective procedures, and 11% are eliminating some clinical services and programs.

Responses to the survey are listed below. Comparisons to previous years are included where relevant and available. All 2022 survey responses are rounded to the nearest digit.



Questions Asked and Responses Received

1.

What type of healthcare facility do you work for?

	2022
Hospital	36%
Medical Group	33%
Other (please specify)	23%
Federally Qualified Health Center	3%
Veterans Affairs or other federal facility	2%
Correctional Facility	2%
Urgent Care Center	1%
Indian Health Facility	<1%

2.

Have you used temporary (locum tenens) physicians or other providers to supplement your existing staff any time during the last 12 months?

	2022	2019	2016	2014	2013	2012
Yes	88%	84%	94%	91%	90%	73.6%
No	12%	16%	6%	9%	10%	26.4%

3.

If yes, what specialties? (check all that apply)

	2022	2019	2016	2014
Hospitalist	25%	24%	25.3%	21.9%
Behavioral Health	23%	17.5%	23.1%	29.9%
Primary Care (FP, IM, Ped)	21%	29%	43.5%	34.8%
Nurse Practitioner	20%	19%	15.6%	17.4%
Internal Medicine Subspecialties	15%	17%	9.1%	8.0%
Surgery	15%	21%	10.8%	14.7%
Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist	14%	17.5%	9.7%	6.3%
Anesthesiology	14%	21%	10.8%	9.8%
Emergency Medicine	14%	23%	17.2%	12.9%
Radiology	14%	11%	7.0%	4.5%
Physician Assistant	12%	12%	10.8%	7.6%
Urgent Care	11%	11%	14.5%	7.6%
Oncology	8%	9%	3.8%	2.7%
Neurology	7%	9%	5.4%	4.9%
Dentistry	6%	10%	4.8%	9.8%
Telemedicine	5%	4%	1.6%	4.5%

4.

Are you currently looking for locum tenens physicians and other providers to supplement your existing staff?

	2022	2019	2016	2014
Yes	47%	71%	47%	42%
No	36%	29%	53%	58%
Unsure/Don't Know	17%	N/A	N/A	N/A

5.

If yes, what specialties? (check all that apply)

	2022	2019	2016	2014
Primary Care (FP, IM, Ped)	25%	31%	36.7%	42.3%
Hospitalist	21%	27%	22.2%	18.6%
Nurse Practitioner	19%	22%	12.2%	22.7%
Surgery	17%	24%	7.8%	8.2%
Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist	17%	16.5%	4.4%	5.2%
Anesthesiology	17%	22%	10.0%	6.2%
Behavioral Health	13%	19%	23.3%	33.0%
Emergency Medicine	12%	30%	21.1%	8.2%
Radiology	12%	16%	5.6%	2.1%
Physician Assistant	11%	16%	5.6%	8.2%
Internal Medicine Subspecialties	9%	21%	5.6%	7.2%
Urgent Care	8%	16.5%	11.1%	7.2%
Neurology	7%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dentistry	7%	10.5%	5.6%	6.2%
Oncology	5%	5%	2.2%	1.0%
Telemedicine	4%	4%	1.1%	1.0%

6.

In a typical month, how many locum tenens physicians and/or NPs/PAs do you use?

	2022	2019	2016	2014
None	22%	11%	24%	27%
1 to 3	57%	56%	52%	55%
4 to 6	6%	13%	14%	10%
7 or more	15%	19%	10%	8%

7.

In a typical month, about how many days of locum tenens coverage do you use?

	2022	2019	2016	2014
None	N/A	N/A	21.2%	22.7%
1 to 5	28%	17%	16.7%	22.7%
6 to 10	15%	18%	8.6%	10.1%
11 to 15	12%	9%	9.6%	9.2%
16 to 20	8%	18%	11.6%	8.0%
21 to 25	7%	10%	10.6%	6.3%
26 to 30	11%	28%	9.1%	9.7%
31 or more	19%	N/A	12.6%	11.3%

8.

Why do you or would you typically use a locum tenens physician or other provider? (check all that apply)

	2022	2019	2016	2014
Fill in until a permanent provider is found	70%	74%	74.6%	68.1%
Meet rising patient demand	25%	27%	13.7%	12.9%
Fill in during peak usage times	23%	21%	10.7%	11.6%
Maintain flexibility to upsize or downsize staff as needed	14%	10%	5.1%	9.1%
Address provider burnout	13%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Provide telemedicine services	5%	6%	3.0%	3.9%
Test market a new service	1%	2%	0.0%	1.7%
Other	18%	N/A	N/A	N/A

9.

What are the benefits of using locum tenens physicians? (Check all that apply)

	2022	2019	2016	2014
Allows continual treatment of patients	66%	73%	69%	70%
Immediate availability of providers	56%	52%	39%	48%
Prevents revenue loss	N/A	33%	37%	41%
Prevents existing staff burnout	35%	38%	36%	33%
Other	5%	8%	4%	6%
Reduce medical errors/readmission	3%	3%	4%	4%

10.

What are the drawbacks to using locum tenens physicians?

	2022	2019	2016	2014
Cost of locum tenens	85%	88%	94%	85%
Lack of Familiarity with department/practice	53%	48%	52%	49%
Learning equipment/procedures	30%	34%	43%	32%
Managing multiple locum tenens staffing providers	32%	30%	35%	22%
Credentialing issues	46%	53%	50%	20%
Unable to bill for locum tenens services	14%	16%	20%	17%
Cancellations	21%	31%	N/A	N/A
Other	7%	N/A	N/A	N/A

11.

What is your perception of the general skill level of locum tenens physicians?

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor
2022	12%	50%	35%	3%
2019	16%	47%	33%	4%
2016	11.6%	54.5%	30.3%	3.5%

12.

How are locum tenens providers viewed by the following at your facility or practice?

	Extremely negative	Somewhat negative	Neither positive nor negative	Somewhat positive	Extremely positive
Colleagues	3%	15%	30%	35%	17%
Patients	0%	8%	44%	32%	16%
Administrators	3%	18%	28%	35%	16%

13.

How would you rate the value of locum tenens physicians to your facility?

	2022	2019	2016	2014
Worth the cost	70%	73%	79.8%	81.1%
Not worth the cost	30%	27%	20.2%	18.9%

14.

What proactive steps is your organization taking to address provider staffing shortages? (Check all that apply).

	2022
Implementing additional hiring incentives (signing bonus, referral bonus, etc.)	54%
Implementing new retention strategies for current staff (retention bonus, etc.)	33%
Hiring additional temporary staff	43%
Expanding telehealth services / offerings	35%
Reassign staff to units with more pressing staffing needs	23%
Adopting new technology solutions	18%
Reducing hours of service in some areas	18%
Canceling / postponing elective procedures	14%
Eliminating some clinical services / programs	11%
Other	9%
Activating your command center / crisis response team	4%

15.

In the last 12 months, have you used locum tenens physicians or advanced practitioners to help treat COVID-19 patients?

Yes	37%
No	49%
Unsure/Don't know	14%

16.

If yes, how important have locum tenens providers been in treating COVID-19 patients at your facility?

Not at all important	4%
Slightly important	11%
Moderately important	27%
Very important	41%
Extremely important	17%



Trends and Observations

AMN Healthcare's 2022 *Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends* provides insight into how often healthcare organizations use temporary (locum tenens) physicians and other providers, why they use these providers, their perceived skill levels and related matters. Selected trends and observations derived from the survey follow:

A Mobile Healthcare Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed focus to the fact that the healthcare workforce includes a robust and growing component of mobile healthcare professionals who work temporary assignments at locations of their choosing.

Temporary nurses, or "travel nurses" as they are commonly known, have been particularly prominent during the pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) the number of registered nurses employed in Temporary Help Services rose by 23,630 in 2021, or approximately 55%. Though travel nurses still represent a relatively small portion of the nursing workforce, for years they have played an important role in augmenting services where and when needed, and that role is growing.

A similar statement could be made about locum tenens physicians and advanced practice professionals such as nurse practitioners (NPs), physician assistants (PAs) and certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs).

AMN Healthcare's 2022 *Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends* suggests that the use of locum tenens physicians and advanced practice professionals at hospitals, medical groups, and other healthcare facilities is a standard practice. The chart below indicates that the use of locum tenens physicians has been pervasive for over 10 years.

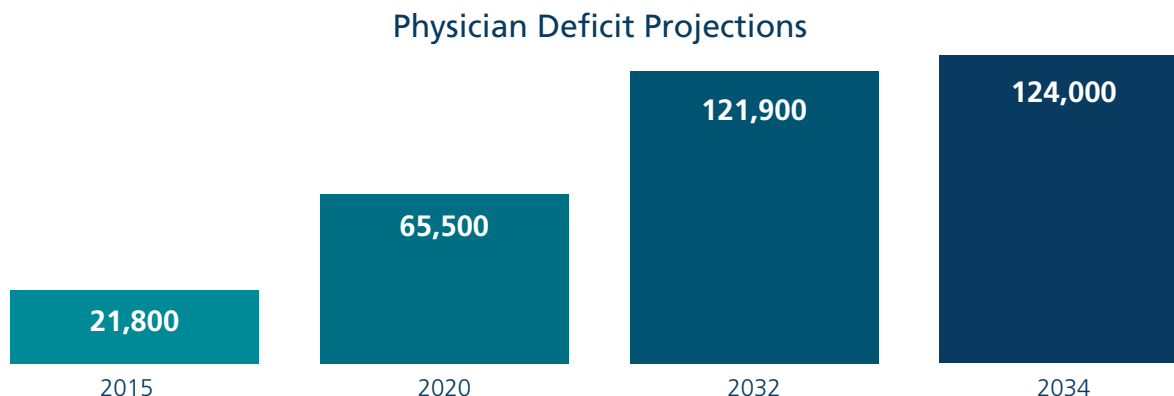
Have You Used Locum Tenens Physicians in the Previous 12 Months?						
2022	2019	2016	2014	2013	2012	2011
88%	84%	94%	91%	90%	74%	75%

Source: AMN Healthcare/Staff Care's Survey of Locum Tenens Staffing Trends.

The widespread use of locum tenens physicians has been driven by a growing physician shortage, which likely will be exacerbated by COVID-19.

Demographics Driving a Growing Shortage of Physicians

In its June 2021 report, *The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand*, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) forecast that by 2034 the United States will face a deficit of up to 124,000 physicians. The chart below illustrates the rise of physician deficits as projected by the AAMC.



Source: *The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand*. Association of American Medical Colleges. June, 2021.

Changing demographics are the biggest driver of increased demand for physicians, according to the AAMC report. From 2019 to 2034, the U.S. population is projected to grow by 10%, from about 328 million people to 363 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, with a 42.4% increase among those aged 65 or above. People in this age category visit a physician at three to four times the frequency of younger people, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

At the same time, the physician workforce is aging. More than two of every five active physicians in the U.S. will be 65 or older in the next decade, according to the AAMC report, and the nation faces an impending “physician retirement cliff.”

The maldistribution of physicians and unequal access to their services also remains a challenge. According to the AAMC report, “If marginalized minority populations, people living in rural areas, and people without health insurance had the same health care use patterns as populations with fewer barrier to access, up to an additional 180,400 physicians would be needed now.”

In 2019, the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) estimated that an additional 13,758 primary care physicians and 6,100 psychiatrists would be needed to remove over 7,000 Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) designations. These are locations in which the number of primary care and mental health providers falls short of government standards. According to research conducted by the AAMC in 2019, 35% of survey respondents said they or someone they know had trouble finding a doctor in the past year or two. This is a 10-point increase from when the question was asked in 2015.

Widespread Ill Health

An additional factor driving demand for physicians and other providers is the widespread incidence of ill-health among the U.S. population. According to the CDC, six in 10 adult Americans suffer from a chronic condition such as diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, or others. Four in six adult Americans suffer from more than one of these conditions.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Physician Supply and Retention

In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health identified physician burnout as a public health crisis. The pandemic has since added accelerant to this problem.

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the personal well-being of many physicians. Following are responses to the **2020 Survey of America's Physicians** conducted by Merritt Hawkins (an AMN Healthcare company) on behalf of The Physicians Foundation:

Have You Personally Done or Experienced Any of the Following as a Result of Covid-19?	
Sought medical attention for a physical problem	24%
Sought medical attention for a mental health problem	13%
Began use of medication, alcohol and/or illicit drugs	10%
Withdrew from friends and family	43%
Had inappropriate feelings of anger, tearfulness or anxiety	50%
Had thoughts or actions about self-harm	8%

Source: 2020 Survey of America's Physicians: Covid-19 Impact Edition. The Physicians Foundation/Merritt Hawkins. September 2020.

Provider Burnout and the "Great Resignation"

The majority of physicians surveyed by Merritt Hawkins (58%) said they often experience feelings of burnout – up from 40% in 2018. More than one-third (38%) said they would like to retire in the next year. This includes 43% of physicians 46 or older, but also one-fifth (21%) of physicians 45 or younger who still are at the front-end of their careers.

This high level of burnout is likely to increase the number of physicians who opt for early retirement, while causing others to seek positions that are less stressful, creating widespread volatility and turnover in the physician workforce – a trend sometimes referred to in the overall employment sector as the "Big Quit" or the "Great Resignation." Both workforce volatility and turnover are driving the use of locum tenens physicians and other providers.

Locum Tenens Use Rebounds from COVID-19

In the course of a calendar year, AMN Healthcare conducts thousands of locum tenens staffing engagements in which we seek to place locum tenens physicians and other providers on behalf of hospitals, medical groups, government facilities and other organizations nationwide.

AMN Healthcare quantifies these engagements in terms of "days requested," e.g., the number of days clients request to be covered by locum tenens providers in various clinical categories.

During the height of the pandemic, utilization of healthcare services declined precipitously as elective procedures were curtailed in many areas and as many patients deemed it unsafe to visit a physician's office, hospital or other healthcare setting.

Demand for locum tenens physicians experienced a corresponding decline from which it has since rebounded. The number of locum tenens days requested AMN Healthcare received from clients was up 105% from year-end 2020 to year-end 2021, underscoring a renewed demand for locum tenens providers. Days requested were up 6.4% from year-end 2019, indicating that demand for locum tenens providers now exceeds that of the year prior to the pandemic.

What Types of Locum Tenens Providers Are the Most Utilized?

Healthcare facility managers were asked what types of locum tenens providers their facilities have used over the last 12 months. Twenty-eight percent said their facilities had used locum tenens anesthesia providers, either anesthesiologists or certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs), up from 22% in 2019.

This is a clear indication that the number of medical procedures requiring anesthesia is increasing and that insufficient providers are available to administer anesthesia. Because many such procedures were shut down during the height of the pandemic, a backlog of patients requiring procedures developed. This has accelerated demand for anesthesiology providers, as have the demographic and disease incidence trends referenced above.

Twenty-five percent of healthcare facility managers said their facilities had used locum tenens hospitalists over the prior 12 months, suggesting that finding a sufficient number of physicians trained in hospital medicine is a challenge for many facilities. The COVID-19 pandemic likely contributed to demand for hospitalists, as it led to many hospital admissions of seriously ill patients requiring extensive staff time. Demand also has been high for “laborists” – e.g., obstetrician/gynecologists (OB/GYNs) who specializes in caring for women in labor and delivering babies. Laborists work on site at the hospital, devoting their full attention to any woman who arrives in labor.

Behavioral health specialists, including psychiatrists, were the third most utilized type of locum tenens provider over the last year. Twenty-three percent of those surveyed said their facilities had used locum tenens behavioral health specialists over the prior 12 months, suggesting that a nationwide shortage of psychiatrists and other behavioral health specialists continues and may be exacerbated by COVID-19. In an April 2020 study, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 45% of adult Americans said their mental health had been affected by the pandemic, with 19% indicating it had a “major impact.” (*The Impact of the Coronavirus on Life in America. Kaiser Family Foundation. April 2020*).

Locum tenens primary care physicians, including family medicine physicians, internal medicine physicians and pediatricians were used by 21% of healthcare facilities in the prior 12 months. An additional 20% used locum tenens NPs, while 12% used locum tenens PAs, both of whom also often provide primary care. These findings underscore the continued strong demand for primary care services, while also indicating that an increasing volume of primary care is being provided by NPs and PAs. Often, NPs and PAs provide primary care in urgent care clinics, retail clinics or through telemedicine – all of which offer consumer convenience. The rise of “convenient care” is shifting the primary care model from the traditional physician office-based setting, to more transactional settings where convenience rather than continuity of care is emphasized.

The survey indicates that physician shortages are not confined to hospital medicine, behavioral health and primary care. Fifteen percent of those surveyed used locum tenens surgeons in the last 12 months while 15% used locum tenens internal medicine subspecialists, indicating a shortage of these types of physicians persists. Physician specialists such as orthopedic surgeons, obstetrician/gynecologists, cardiologists, gastroenterologists, neurologists, rheumatologists and others often treat the ailments of older patients, who are growing in number. Physician specialists themselves also are among the oldest types of physicians, and many are on the verge of retirement as demand for their services grows. Demand for specialist physicians can therefore be expected to rapidly accelerate over the next several years.

Why Use Locum Tenens Providers?

The number one reason healthcare facility managers cited for using locum tenens physicians and other providers, cited by 70% of respondents, is to fill in while the facility seeks a permanent provider. In instances where healthcare facilities do not have enough providers and are seeking more, they often use locum tenens providers to maintain services and revenue. Some use locum tenens providers for just a few days, some for up to a year or more. Many rural hospitals, correctional facilities, Veterans Administration (VA) facilities and FQHCs, which typically are challenged when it comes to recruiting permanent staff, are particularly dependent on locum tenens providers to maintain health services and generate revenue.

An additional reason for using locum tenens physicians and other providers, cited by 25% of survey respondents, is to meet rising patient demand, which can be caused by service area population growth, population aging, or healthcare emergencies such as COVID-19.

Twenty-three percent of survey respondents indicated they use locum tenens providers during peak usage times, such as flu season, while 14% said they use locum tenens providers to maintain staffing flexibility, upsizing or downsizing staff as needed.

As was referenced above, physician burnout has become a serious staffing challenge for many healthcare facilities. Thirteen percent of those surveyed indicated they use locum tenens physicians and other providers to address burnout by reducing the workload of permanent staff. An additional 5% said they use locum tenens providers to implement telemedicine services.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Using Locum Tenens

The main benefit of using locum tenens physicians and other providers, cited by 66% of those surveyed, is to maintain continuity of patient care. When full-time providers are absent for any reason, patients may not be able to access the care they need, or they may migrate to other sites of service. Locum tenens providers allow healthcare facilities to maintain the continuity of care that is important to both quality outcomes and to patient satisfaction and loyalty.

By seeing patients who might otherwise have gone elsewhere, locum tenens providers also allow medical facilities to maintain revenue streams. The opportunity cost of not having a physician in place can be considerable. According to a study by Merritt Hawkins, physicians on average generate \$2.4 million a year in net revenue on behalf of their affiliated hospitals. The chart below indicates how this breaks out on a pro-rated monthly basis for several medical specialties:

Net Revenue Generated by Physicians for Hospitals Pro Rated Over One Month	
Family Practice	\$175,994
Internal Medicine	\$222,782
Gastroenterology	\$247,106
Orthopedic Surgery	\$273,897

Source: Merritt Hawkins 2019 Survey of Physician Inpatient/Outpatient Revenue

As these numbers indicate, a hospital can lose hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue when physician positions go unfilled for a relatively short period of time.

The primary drawback of using locum tenens physicians and other providers, cited by 85% of survey respondents, is cost. Locum tenens physicians and other providers are paid on a per diem basis, with rates that can range from a few hundred dollars per day to over \$1,500, depending on the specialty. However, with the right procedures in place, healthcare facilities can bill for the services of locum tenens providers and recoup costs in this manner.

Fifty-three percent of survey respondents cited lack of familiarity with the department or practice as a drawback of using locum tenens physicians and other providers. Locum tenens providers typically undergo an orientation prior to their assignments, and must be adept at learning and adapting to new environments quickly.

Rating the Skills of Locum Tenens Physicians

Healthcare facility managers were asked to rate the general skill level of locum tenens physicians. The majority (62%) rated their skills as either good or excellent. About one third (35%) rated their skills as adequate, while only 3% rated their skills as poor.

The widespread use of locum tenens providers indicated by the survey suggests that quality control may become more challenging, as thousands of temporary physicians must be screened and credentialed each year. It therefore is important that healthcare facilities using locum tenens providers confirm the efficacy of the quality control measures locum tenens staffing companies have in place and whether they are accredited by the Joint Commission and are NCQA certified.

Providers practicing locum tenens today are rigorously screened because staffing firms are at risk for their malpractice insurance and because firms compete with each other based on the quality of physicians they are able to provide. As a result, the quality of locum of tenens physicians is generally considered to be high or at least adequate, as is reflected in survey responses.

Perception of Colleagues and Others

Healthcare facility managers were asked to indicate how locum tenens providers are viewed by various parties, including permanent providers on their staffs, patients and administrators. The majority (52%) said that locum tenens providers are viewed extremely positively or somewhat positively by their colleagues on the permanent staff, while 18% said they are viewed somewhat negatively or very negatively. The remaining 30% said they are viewed neither positively nor negatively by permanent staff.

Forty-eight percent said that patients view locum tenens providers either somewhat positively or extremely positively, while 8% view them somewhat negatively. A large number of patients (44%) view locum tenens providers neither positively nor negatively, which may be due to the fact that patients sometimes are unaware that they are being treated by a locum tenens provider.

The majority of those surveyed (51%) said that facility administrators view locum tenens providers either very positively or somewhat positively, while 21% view them somewhat negatively or very negatively. The remaining 21% view them neither positively nor negatively. Because only 3% of healthcare facility managers rated the skill level of locum tenens physician as poor, it may be assumed that quality of care is generally not the reason some facility administrators do not view locum tenens providers favorably. Cost is a more likely concern, as per diem rates for locum tenens providers increase during times of high demand such as the current COVID-19 pandemic.



Are Locum Tenens Worth the Cost?

As was referenced above, healthcare facilities pay a daily rate for the services of locum tenens providers that can range widely based on specialty. Balanced against this are the various benefits locum tenens providers bring, including the ability to maintain both medical services and revenue. On balance, the majority of healthcare facility managers surveyed (70%) indicated that locum tenens physicians are worth the cost, while 30% said they are not.

The Role of Locum Tenens in COVID-19

The survey indicates that locum tenens providers have played an active role in treating COVID-19 patients. Over one-third of those surveyed (37%) indicated their facilities had used locum tenens physicians or advanced practitioners such as NPs and PAs to treat COVID-19 patients, while 49% did not use them for this purpose. The remaining 14% were not sure or did not know.

Of those that used locum tenens providers to treat COVID-19 patients, the majority (85%) said that locum tenens providers were either moderately important, very important, or extremely important in treating COVID-19 patients. Like travel nurses, locum tenens physicians and advanced practice professionals have been an important staffing supplement on the front lines of COVID-19 care.

What are Healthcare Facilities doing to Address Staffing Shortages?

In a new question, first asked in the 2022 survey, healthcare facility managers were asked what steps their organizations are taking to address provider staffing shortages.

The measure being most frequently taken is implementing additional hiring incentives such as signing bonuses and referral bonuses, cited by 54% of those surveyed. A signing bonus can add an extra dimension to an incentive package that may separate the position from others not offering a bonus. Referral bonuses may lead to existing staff taking a more active role in identifying potential new hires.

About one half of those surveyed (49%) said their facilities were implementing new retention strategies such as retention bonuses. As was referenced above, COVID-19 has created unprecedented levels of volatility within the physician and advanced practitioner workforce, so that healthcare facilities must commit additional resources and energy to retaining the staff they already have. Part of these efforts may include the use of locum tenens providers to ease pressure on permanent staff during high usage periods.

Over four in ten of those surveyed (43%) indicated they are hiring additional temporary staff such as locum tenens providers to address staffing shortages. These may include locum tenens physicians and advanced practitioners, as well as travel nurses and temporary allied healthcare professionals. An additional 35% are expanding telehealth services, 23% are reassigning staff to units with more pressing staffing needs, and 18% are adopting new technology solutions,

During the height of the pandemic, many healthcare facilities cut back on hours or cancelled certain types of procedures. The survey indicates some facilities continue to implement these measures to address staffing shortages. Eighteen percent of those surveyed said they are reducing hours of service in some areas, 14% are canceling elective procedures, and 11% are eliminating some clinical services and programs. As these numbers suggest, staffing shortages are having a negative impact on patient access to care by causing healthcare facilities to reduce or eliminate services.



Conclusion

A shortage of physicians and advanced practice professionals such as nurse practitioners (NPs), physician assistants (PAs) and registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) is driving the use of locum tenens providers, who primarily are utilized to fill in while permanent staff are being found. Demand for locum tenens providers, which was initially depressed by COVID-19, now exceeds levels in the year preceding the pandemic.

The great majority of healthcare facility managers surveyed (88%) said they used locum tenens providers sometime in the last 12 months. The most used types of locum tenens providers were anesthesia providers (anesthesiologists and CRNAs), followed by hospitalists, behavioral health professionals and primary care providers. COVID-19, which has increased burnout and volatility in the healthcare workforce, is likely to accelerate the use of locum tenens providers to fill gaps caused by turnover and to reduce pressure on permanent staff.

Locum tenens providers have played an active role during the pandemic. Over one-third of those surveyed (37%) said their facilities used locum tenens provider to care for COVID-19 patients. The majority of those surveyed (97%) rate the skill level of locum tenens providers as excellent, good or adequate, while 70% indicate they are worth the cost.

Healthcare facilities are taking a variety of steps to address staffing shortages, including adding hiring incentives such as signing bonuses, providing retention bonuses and increasing the use of temporary staff, such as locum tenens physicians and other providers.

For more information about this survey or locums tenens staffing through AMN Healthcare, please contact:

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