Diversity Matters: Strategies to Diversify California's Health Care Workforce

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Overview

The evidence is clear: California needs a diverse health care workforce to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population.[1] This policy brief provides evidence-based policy recommendations. An accompanying issue brief explores what we know about the diversity of California's licensed health care workforce and details what works to increase the diversity of health care workers.

Why it matters

Increasing the diversity of lived experiences and identities (such as race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, geography, languages spoken, and socioeconomic background) among health care workers improves health care access, quality,[2,3] communication, and trust,[4] especially for systematically disadvantaged patient populations.[5]

Solutions

To best meet the needs of Californians today and in the future, policies, practices, and programs that advance the diversity of health care workers need to be prioritized. Outlined below are the evidence-informed policy levers to support programs that improve health care workforce diversity in California, many of which were also recommended by the California Future Health Workforce Commission in 2019.

Note: These strategies are ways in which progress toward increasing racial/ethnic and other forms of diversity can be made within the constraints of national (Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard) and state (Proposition 209) bans on race-conscious admissions policies.

Support and cultivate diverse populations' interest in health careers and access to higher education by growing institutional support and providing sustained funding for bridge, pathway, and postbaccalaureate programs:

1. "Bridging" or summer enrichment programs offer academic support and exposure to help high school and undergraduate students pursue health careers.
2. Pathway programs identify, expose, and nurture potential health care workers with educational and career support, exposure to the field, and mentorship opportunities.
3. Postbaccalaureate programs support graduate admissions for students with historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Promote, sustain, and grow adoption of best practices for recruiting, admitting, and supporting diverse students in college/university training:

1. Build cross-sector partnerships between community colleges, community-based organizations, minority-serving and K-12 educational institutions – with sustained funding requiring these partnerships – to recruit diverse students and provide sponsored experiences.
2. Reform admissions policies to prioritize holistic review and qualities central to institutional missions over standardized test scores and grade point averages; support applicants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with virtual interview options, fee waivers, and travel stipends; incentivize diverse admissions

committees, and require training on implicit bias and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

3 Institutionalize DEI in school culture through policies, curricula, climate assessments, and support systems such as mentorship and advising. Hire and train diverse faculty, and require implicit bias, anti-discrimination, and DEI training for all school employees.

4 Expand financial support through sustained state and philanthropic scholarships, using holistic review to increase access for students from systematically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Promote, sustain, and grow adoption of best practices for further training of and practicing diverse health professionals:

1 Cohort programs with specialized training and clinical experiences prepare students to serve systematically disadvantaged populations. Expanding these programs across health care professions requires institutional support and sustained state funding.

2 State training grants and graduate medical education (GME) tied to high-need specialties (e.g., primary care) and regions (e.g., rural) help meet health workforce needs and support more diverse trainees with backgrounds like those in systematically underserved areas throughout California.

3 Loan repayment programs recruit graduates to work in systematically underserved areas, and combining repayment with retention strategies increases the number of health professionals practicing in these areas over the long term. Holistic review can expand access for systematically underrepresented candidates.

Reduce barriers to enrollment and advancement and promote accountability:

1 Increase coordination across education programs, accreditation and certification bodies, and licensing boards to create stackable credentials and streamline prerequisites for enrolling in health care degree programs.

2 Accreditation and certification bodies that set standards for educational programs should develop explicit policies, standards, and criteria expressing the value and importance of DEI and recruiting diverse students and faculty in health care professions training.

3 State agencies (like the California Department of Health Care Access and Information, HCAI) should track health workforce diversity to assess policy impact. Sustain and expand HCAI's role in enhancing data collection and reporting to identify critical gaps and monitor progress over time. Consider greater coordination and data sharing across state agencies that license or certify health care workers.

Conclusion

A diverse health care workforce is a critical component of a high-functioning health care system and promotes social justice by providing economic opportunities for everyone to thrive. By supporting these policies and programs, we can create a more inclusive and effective health care workforce that better reflects the diversity of the communities it serves.

About us

Policy at Healthforce promotes health workforce diversity and economic opportunities in California through a responsive, community-informed research and policy agenda rooted in social justice, with support from The California Endowment. Policy at Healthforce is part of Healthforce Center at UCSF, a trusted partner to funders, policymakers, and health care organizations, delivering impactful research, evaluation, policy insights, and capacity building programs.

Authors

Aubri Kottek, MPH, research and program manager; Taylor B. Rogers, PhD, MPH, postdoctoral scholar; Janet Coffman, PhD, MA, MPP, professor; Elizabeth Mertz, PhD, MA, professor and associate director of research.

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