

Alaska Health Care Workforce Profile

Identifying occupations
that are hardest to fill
2016



**Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
Research and Analysis Section**

In partnership with:



UAA College of Health
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Report Summary

This report details the health care occupations Alaska employers reported were most difficult to fill. It also introduces new data on occupational retention and provides occupational and demographic data on the existing health care workforce to help identify why some occupations are especially difficult for employers to fill. That information is intended to inform decisions about education, training, and other workforce development efforts.

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Introduction

No major Alaska industry has grown more than health care for decades. From 2005 to 2015 alone, health care employment grew by 32 percent, which was more than triple the state's overall job growth of just under 10 percent.

Neighboring states and the U.S. as a whole also experienced robust and sustained health care growth over the last decade, but Alaska's was five to 10 percentage points higher. The state's health care industry has continued to grow even as overall job growth has slowed in recent years due to low oil prices, declining oil production, and related fiscal challenges for state government.

That kind of growth puts pressure on those responsible for guiding education, training, and workforce development dollars to their most productive use. If those decisions are made poorly or if investment in training health care workers is inadequate, consumers will receive lower quality care — or no care — and employers will resort to more expensive and usually temporary out-of-state workers to meet demand.

But the challenge is more complicated than just identifying the occupations for which more people need

to be trained. Expanding a training program won't resolve a shortage of qualified applicants, for instance, if low wages and unpleasant working conditions are the real reason for the shortage.

It's also not enough to conclude that more health care workers are needed across the board, as not all occupations are difficult to fill. For example, the survey for this report found that 100 percent of responding Alaska health care employers found it difficult to fill openings for psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse practitioners, and rehabilitation counselors. However, less than a third reported it was difficult to hire physical therapist aides, medical records filing clerks, and EMTs.

The more specifically the workforce development community can identify health care employers' most pressing workforce needs, the more effectively it can respond.

This survey took a more direct and comprehensive approach

Previous efforts to collect information to help prioritize health care workforce development included employer vacancy surveys in 2007, 2009, and 2012. Those surveys elicited some useful information but were difficult for



employers to complete and for researchers to analyze because of the difficulty of defining a “vacancy” in a way that was comparable across all health care employers.

This survey took a more direct approach, asking both rural and urban Alaska employers which occupations they had difficulty filling based on the availability of qualified applicants. Survey response rates and employer comments suggested that the survey was easy to complete, and the responses were clear in showing where workforce development interventions are needed most.

The second major piece of this report is a comprehensive look at retention data by occupation, a new product based partly on the assumption that one of the best ways to mitigate hiring difficulties is to keep workers longer once they are hired. At the high end of the retention spectrum, dental hygienists work an average of 7.2 years in Alaska. At the low end, file clerks and physical therapist aides work an average of only about 1.5 years.

Detailed information in appendices is more than supplemental

Much of the report’s value lies in the first two appendices, which provide as much detail for individual occupations as the available data could support. An example occupation, substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors, illustrates what can be found there.

Appendix A shows that 90 percent of responding employers said those occupations were difficult to fill. Among urban employers, it was 87 percent, and among rural employers, 100 percent.

Appendix B shows that the average substance abuse counselor worked 2.17 years and that half of those tracked worked one year or less. A total of 383 people worked as substance abuse counselors in 2014, with 262 working in urban locations and 121 in rural areas. Thirteen of those workers were nonresidents (using the Permanent



Fund Dividend criteria, which require a person to have lived in the state for a full calendar year to be a resident), 74 percent were female, and 52 percent were 45 or older. Strong growth for these occupations is projected over the next decade in Alaska and the nation as a whole.

That expanded information is valuable in isolation, but even more so when compared to the other health care occupations to give it context. Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors are among the 10 most difficult occupations for employers to fill, hourly wages are among the lowest of all health care occupations, and retention in the occupation is very low relative to other occupations.

Survey Responses and Analysis

Nearly 1,600 employers of health care workers were asked to complete the “2015 Health Workforce Survey.” The survey asked them to identify whether they had any openings in 2014 in occupations they were likely to employ based on their industry classification as a hospital, doctor’s office, etc. The survey then asked whether the occupations for which they had openings were “not difficult,” “difficult,” or “critically difficult” to fill. “Critically difficult” was defined as a position for which the inability to hire would impact the employer’s ability to provide health services to clients. We ultimately combined “difficult” and “critically difficult” responses and presented occupations as either “not difficult” or “difficult” to fill, because the difference between “difficult” and “critically difficult” was not distinct enough.

Nearly 900 employers responded — a 55 percent response rate — and we coded their responses by industry, status as urban or rural, and size class. Employers were surveyed using the Alaska Standardized Health Care Taxonomy, or AKSHOT, which provides additional occupational detail compared to the more widely used Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) taxonomy. Registered nurses, for example, in the SOC taxonomy are broken out into nine different types of nursing specialty practice areas in addition to “registered nurses, general” in the AKSHOT taxonomy. (See appendices D and E for more details and crosswalks between the two.)

Appendix A catalogues all the occupations and provides survey response rates where there were a sufficient number of responses to produce reliable data. For smaller occupations, such as the first two in the alphabetical listing in Appendix A (anesthesiologists and audiologists), there were too few responses to produce useful information even for all employers of those occupations combined. At the other end of the spectrum, responses from employers of “registered nurses, general” were sufficient enough to provide information by industry, status as urban or rural employers, and employer size class.

The Most Difficult Occupations to Fill Overall

Looking broadly at the responses (that is, not stratified by industry, urban/rural status, or size class), survey responses showed the following:

- There was a wide range of reported difficulty. At one end of the spectrum, 100 percent of employers who had hired for certain occupations identified those occupations as difficult to fill. At the other end, only

Rank	Occupation	% Who Reported Difficulty
1	Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners	100%
1	Psychiatrists	100%
1	Rehabilitation Counselors	100%
4	Chief Medical Officers	94%
5	Surgical Technicians and Technologists	93%
6	Psychiatric Nurses	91%
7	Substance Use Disorder Counselors	90%
8	Occupational Therapist	90%
9	Mammographers	89%
10	Perioperative Nurses	88%
11	Nurse Managers	87%
12	Pharmacists	86%
12	Obstetric Nurses	86%
12	Diagnostic Medical Sonographers	86%
15	Geriatric Nurses	85%
16	Case Management Nurses	84%
16	Speech-Language Pathologists	84%
18	Critical Care Nurses	83%
18	MRI Technologists	83%
18	Pediatricians	83%
20	Physical Therapists	82%

25 percent of employers said other occupations were difficult to fill. (See tables 1 and 2.)

- The most obvious pattern in the table of occupations most difficult to fill is that nearly all of them require at least a bachelor’s degree and none require less than an associate degree. Knowing that significant training is required for these hardest-to-fill occupations invites some key questions:
 1. How much of the required training is being done in Alaska?
 2. How attractive is employment in Alaska to trained workers outside the state or students completing training out of state and looking for their first job?
 3. How well does “growing our own” in Alaska fulfill the need for workers?

Expanding the capacity of in-state training programs or

creating new programs for the hardest-to-fill occupations is appealing in its simplicity and directness, but a variety of other tools might also alleviate the pressure. Creating recruitment incentives for qualified workers from other states is one example, and assessing the degree to which retention is part of the problem and attempting to improve it is another. Longer term strategies include educating and encouraging Alaska’s youth to consider health care careers from an early age.

For some of the occupations requiring high levels of training, Alaska has limited training options. Among the occupations listed as the 20 most difficult to fill, the state has no in-state training options for MRI technologists or physical therapists and only small, partial residencies for psychiatrists and pediatricians offered through the University of Washington. Some nurse specialties also require postgraduate education not available in the state.

To partly compensate for these limitations, Alaska has implemented loan repayment and direct incentive programs to practitioners who commit to practicing in Alaska for a certain period of time. These programs are widely used for recruitment and retention in health care occupations, especially where there’s a specific public interest in having sufficient and sufficiently trained workers.

Another pattern in the list of 20 occupations that are most difficult to fill is the number of different types of nurses. Seven out of the 20 were some type of nurse, nurse manager, or nurse practitioner. The likely reason is that among occupations that require significant training, nursing is especially large in terms of the number employed and also an occupation that has recorded strong growth for an extended period of time.

The Least Difficult Occupations to Fill Overall

Table 2 shows the occupations employers identified as less difficult to fill. One cautionary note in interpreting these results is that because the survey was limited to employers of health care workers, we don’t know how these percentages would compare to non-health care occupations. Given health care’s strong growth over the last few decades, it’s fair to assume that even some of the health care occupations that are less difficult to fill would be harder to fill than many occupations outside health care.

The occupations in this group generally require minimal training and education, but there are exceptions. For example, radiologists require a medical degree, and dentists have to graduate from dental school. And though advanced degrees are not generally required, an occupational health and safety specialist needs a bachelor’s degree. Possible reasons these occupations are relatively easy to fill are: 1) favorable working conditions

Rank	Occupation	% Who Reported Difficulty
1	Physical Therapist Aides	27%
2	Medical Records Filing Clerks	28%
3	Emergency Medical Technicians	31%
4	Medical Records and Health Information Technicians	33%
5	Medical Secretaries	39%
6	Medical Assistants	41%
7	Pharmacy Technicians	42%
8	Limited Radiologic Technicians	43%
9	X-Ray Technicians and Technologists	46%
9	Phlebotomists	46%
11	Radiologists	50%
11	Occupational Health and Safety Spec.	50%
11	Physical Therapy Assistants	50%
14	Dental Hygienists	52%
14	Health Care Social and Community Services Managers	52%
16	Dentists	53%
17	Massage Therapists	54%
18	Certified Nursing Assistants	56%
18	Behavioral Health Case Managers and Care Coordinators	56%
19	Home Health Aides	57%
19	Medical and Clinical Lab Technicians	57%
19	Community Wellness Advocates	57%

and other nonwage benefits, and 2) relatively high wages.

Occupations Most Difficult to Fill in Rural Alaska

The survey confirmed that rural Alaska employers typically have more difficulty filling health care positions than urban employers, but not for all occupations. Table 3 shows the occupations most difficult to fill according to rural employers, which include several that are not on the overall list of hardest-to-fill occupations and several others that are on the list but were noticeably more difficult for rural employers to fill. For example, all rural employers had difficulty finding geriatric nurses, occupational therapists, and pharmacists, but because none of those occupations were among the top 10 most difficult to fill

for urban employers (Table 5), they were further down the overall list (Table 1).

Occupations Least Difficult to Fill in Rural Alaska

Occupations that were least difficult to fill in rural Alaska (Table 4) tended to require little specialized training, and the required training was available on the job or without more than a brief time away from a rural location. It is telling that some of these occupations are actually less difficult to fill in rural Alaska than they are in urban Alaska (Table 6). For example, pharmacy technicians and certified nursing assistants were among the least difficult to fill rurally but not on that list for urban Alaska. The likely reason, discussed more below, is that rural Alaska has fewer occupational options, so what constitutes a “good job” is different. Year-round jobs that pay moderately well and don’t require years of training away from home are scarcer in rural Alaska, which likely means larger applicant pools and easier recruitment for rural employers.



Most Difficult Occupations to Fill in Urban Alaska

The list of occupations most difficult to fill in urban Alaska (Table 5) has fewer occupations that 100 percent of employers said were difficult to fill. Behavioral health occupations were well represented on the list:

psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse practitioners, psychiatric nurses, clinical social workers, and substance abuse counselors. The fact that chief medical officers are difficult to fill in both urban and rural locations probably says more about the complexity and difficulty of managing health care medical operations than anything else. That problem is unlikely to go away any time soon and probably can’t be addressed as effectively by the tools useful for other occupations (e.g., expanding training, raising awareness of the benefits of health care careers, and loan forgiveness/ direct payment programs).

Rank	Occupation	% Who Reported Difficulty
1	Chief Medical Officers	100%
1	Geriatric Nurses	100%
1	Occupational Therapists	100%
1	Pharmacists	100%
1	Rehabilitation Counselors	100%
1	Speech-Language Pathologists	100%
1	Substance Use Disorder Counselors	100%
1	Surgical Technicians and Technologists	100%
9	Case Management Nurses	91%
10	Dentists	90%

Rank	Occupation	% Who Reported Difficulty
1	Physical Therapist Aides	29%
2	Medical Records Filing Clerks	32%
3	Pharmacy Technicians	33%
4	Medical Secretaries	36%
5	Medical Records and Health Information Technicians	42%
6	Certified Nursing Assistants	44%
7	Medical Assistants	52%
8	Medical and Clinician Lab Technicians	53%
9	X-Ray Technicians and Technologists	56%
10	Occupational Therapy Assistants	57%

Least Difficult Occupations to Fill in Urban Alaska

The list of occupations least difficult to fill in urban Alaska (Table 6) is similar to the comparable list for rural Alaska, but dentists were one of the 10 least difficult occupations to fill in urban Alaska and one of the 10 most difficult in rural Alaska.

Occupations substantially more difficult to fill rurally

Many occupations were substantially more difficult to fill in rural Alaska than in urban Alaska. Table 7 shows those with a difference of at least 20 percentage points.

Nearly all of these occupations require significant postsecondary training only available in urban Alaska or, in a few cases, out of state (dentists and chiropractors). Some rural Alaskans who leave home for training would presumably not return because their new, marketable skills would put them in high demand in both rural and urban settings.

That's one of the consistent challenges of workforce development in rural Alaska: training that provides clear benefits for rural students in terms of lifetime earnings and reduced likelihood of unemployment does not always benefit their rural home because the training makes it more likely they can find work elsewhere. Scholarships or other incentives that are contingent on rural students returning to work in rural areas may help. Another promising option is apprenticeships, which create unique opportunities to train and work locally and foster bonds with rural employers.

Occupations substantially less difficult to fill rurally

There were fewer occupations rural employers had less difficulty filling than urban employers, and the difference between the two was smaller. (See Table 8.)

Several of these occupations require little postsecondary training and many require only on-the-job training. As discussed earlier, the fact that rural Alaska has more limited wage and salary job opportunities, both in the variety of occupations and in the number of jobs relative to the population, is a likely part of the equation. Also, for some positions such as nurse managers, urban facilities may require more advanced education, making it more likely that employers will find it difficult to find qualified applicants.

Rank	Occupation	% Who Reported Difficulty
1	Psychiatrists	100%
1	Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner	100%
1	Mammographers	100%
4	Chief Medical Officers	91%
5	Psychiatric Nurses	89%
5	Surgical Technicians and Technologists	89%
5	Perioperative Nurses	89%
8	Clinical Social Workers	88%
9	Substance Use Disorder Counselors	87%
10	Optometrists	88%

Rank	Occupation	% Who Reported Difficulty
1	Medical Records Filing Clerks	26%
2	Physical Therapist Aides	27%
3	Medical Records and Health Information Technicians	29%
4	Medical Assistants	38%
5	Medical Secretaries	39%
6	Phlebotomists	39%
7	X-Ray Technicians and Technologists	41%
8	Dentists	43%
9	Physical Therapy Assistants	44%
10	Massage Therapists	46%

Table 7		
Occupations Rural Respondents Identified as Substantially More Difficult to Fill Than Urban Respondents		
Rank	Occupation	% Who Replied 'Substantially More'
1	Geriatric Nurses	100% rural/75% urban
2	Speech Language Pathologists	100% rural/77% urban
3	Pharmacists	100% rural/78% urban
4	Dentists	90% rural/43% urban
5	Chiropractors	80% rural/55% urban
6	Sterile Processing Technicians	80% rural/56% urban
7	Dental Hygienists	68% rural/48% urban
8	Physical Therapy Assistants	67% rural/44% urban

Table 8		
Occupations Rural Employers Reported As Substantially Less Difficult to Fill Than Urban Employers		
Rank	Occupation	% Who Replied 'Substantially Less'
1	Nurse Managers	75% rural/91% urban
2	Clinical Social Workers	64% rural/88% urban
3	Licensed Practical Nurses	64% rural/75% urban
4	Dental Assistants	51% rural/64% urban
5	Certified Nursing Assistants	44% rural/61% urban
6	Pharmacy Technicians	33% rural/50% urban

Analysis of Retention and Other Workforce Characteristics

Knowing which occupations are most difficult to fill leads naturally to questions about the degree to which people are likely to remain in those occupations once hired. Although we could not compile retention data for all occupations because a certain number of workers were required over the period, this newly created data set looks promising as a means to understanding and improving occupational retention.

As noted in the introduction, the retention, wage, and demographic information discussed briefly here and detailed in Appendix B uses less detailed occupational codes than the survey data. See appendices D and E for more information and crosswalks between the two.

Sorting occupations by wages and retention

Table 9 is the list of occupations sorted by hourly wages. Table 10 sorts occupations by the average number of years people in that occupation worked from 2001 to 2014.

As one might expect, the higher an occupation's hourly wages ranked, the higher it tended to rank by retention. However, the connection between wages and retention is somewhat loose. Table 11 examines that relationship and highlights occupations that ranked noticeably higher by wages than by retention. Table 12 does the inverse, highlighting occupations that ranked higher by retention than by wages.

Not surprisingly, other factors besides wages play a role in determining whether a person stays in an occupation. For the occupations in Table 11, the combined nonwage factors — working conditions, meaningfulness of work, etc. — made the occupations appear less desirable. For the occupations in Table 12, the nonwage factors made the occupation more desirable.

Every occupation has a different combination of nonwage factors (which would also differ by employer), and efforts to increase retention would require more in-depth exploration by those familiar with the day-to-day work. But identifying occupations with the lowest retention is the first step toward increasing it, which could be part of the solution for easing pressure in occupations that are hard to fill.

Using the data

The primary value of this report comes from the pairing



of targeted survey data gathered from employers about difficult-to-fill occupations with detailed occupational data from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

To an employer, the data will show whether their hiring experiences are typical among Alaska employers. If the employer is having difficulty hiring for an occupation that other Alaska employers are not, that means the employer can likely mitigate the difficulty, possibly by raising wages, improving working conditions, or dealing with morale or other reputational factors that make them less appealing to applicants. For universally hard-to-fill positions, employers may benefit more from working with other employers and the workforce development system to develop practicum, apprenticeship, or internship opportunities, or help create statewide incentives for retention.

For those in health care workforce development, the information can help:

- Prioritize spending
- Expand targeted training programs and youth engagement initiatives
- Maintain and grow loan repayment and incentives programs

It may be too early to set targets for the percentage of employers that report recruitment difficulties or goals for retention, but that's another potential use. These two data sets — the employer survey and the new retention data — offer clear opportunities to make health care workforce development systems more data driven.

Even without specific targets, simply knowing at regular intervals which occupations are most difficult for employers to fill and whether that difficulty has increased or abated will reveal where workforce development needs are greatest and help separate chronic from temporary problems.

Table 9**Occupations Sorted by Average Hourly Wages**

Rank	Occupation	Average Hourly Wage
1	Physicians and Surgeons, All Other	\$148.32
2	Anesthesiologists	\$147.88
3	Psychiatrists	\$105.62
4	Family and General Practitioners	\$94.92
5	Dentists	\$87.68
6	Chief Executives	\$78.79
7	Pharmacists	\$60.32
8	Physician Assistants	\$55.14
9	Medical and Health Services Managers	\$52.42
10	Financial Managers	\$52.05
11	General and Operations Managers	\$46.71
12	Registered Nurses	\$39.28
13	Physical Therapists	\$39.24
14	Clinical Counseling, and School Psychologists	\$37.73
15	Speech-Language Pathologists	\$35.90
16	Respiratory Therapists	\$34.57
17	Occupational Therapists	\$34.18
18	Health Diagnosing and Treating Practitioners, All Other	\$34.13
19	Radiologic Technologists	\$33.79
20	Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technologists	\$33.68
21	Social and Community Services Managers	\$32.95
22	Dental Hygienists	\$32.41
23	Emergency Medical Technicians and Paramedics	\$30.81
24	Physical Therapist Assistants	\$28.27
25	Dietitians and Nutritionists	\$28.22
26	Mental Health Counselors	\$27.84
27	Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	\$27.52
28	Surgical Technologists	\$26.99
29	Healthcare Social Workers	\$26.60
30	Health Educators	\$26.43
31	Counselors, All Other	\$25.76
32	Health Technologists and Technicians, All Other	\$25.31
33	Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technicians	\$24.42
34	Substance Abuse and Behavioral Disorder Counselors	\$23.64
35	Opticians, Dispensing	\$22.64
36	Medical Equipment Preparers	\$21.95
37	Rehabilitation Counselors	\$21.85

Table 10**Occupations Sorted by Retention**

Rank	Occupation	Average Years Worked
1	Dental Hygienists	7.2
2	Physical Therapists	7.0
3	Registered Nurses	6.9
4	Respiratory Therapists	6.4
5	Speech-Language Pathologists	6.1
6	Occupational Therapists	6.1
7	Pharmacists	5.9
8	Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technologists	5.7
9	Pharmacy Technicians	5.3
10	Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	5.2
11	Physician Assistants	5.1
12	Surgical Technologists	5.1
13	Radiologic Technologists	5.0
14	Chief Executives	4.9
15	Family and General Practitioners	4.9
16	Medical and Health Services Managers	4.7
17	Physicians and Surgeons, All Other	4.6
18	Financial Managers	4.5
19	Health Care Social Workers	4.4
20	Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technicians	4.3
21	Dietitians and Nutritionists	4.2
22	Nursing Assistants	4.1
23	Anesthesiologists	4.1
24	Dental Assistants	4.0
25	General and Operations Managers	4.0
26	Psychiatrists	3.9
27	Opticians, Dispensing	3.9
28	Medical Equipment Preparers	3.8
29	Health Diagnosing and Treating Practitioners, All Other	3.7
30	Dentists	3.7
31	Billing and Posting Clerks	3.5
32	Clinical Counseling, and School Psychologists	3.4
33	Rehabilitation Counselors	3.4
34	Emergency Medical Technicians and Paramedics	3.1
35	Physical Therapist Assistants	3.0
36	Social and Community Services Managers	2.9
37	Psychiatric Technicians	2.8
38	Mental Health Counselors	2.7
39	Medical Assistants	2.7
40	Medical Records and Health Information Technicians	2.6
40	Medical Secretaries	2.6
42	Health Care Support Workers, All Other	2.6
43	Health Technologists and Technicians, All Other	2.5
44	Substance Abuse and Behavioral Disorder Counselors	2.2
45	Health Educators	2.2
46	Massage Therapists	2.2
47	Home Health Aides	2.0
48	Personal Care Aides	1.8
49	Counselors, All Other	1.7
50	Physical Therapist Aides	1.5
51	File Clerks	1.4

Table 11**Occupations With Low Retention Relative to Wages**

Occupation	Rank by Average Hourly Wage	Rank by Retention
Physicians and Surgeons, All Other	1	17
Anesthesiologists	2	23
Psychiatrists	3	26
Family and General Practitioners	4	15
Dentists	5	30
Chief Executives	6	14
Medical and Health Services Managers	9	16
Financial Managers	10	18
General and Operations Managers	11	25
Clinical Counseling, and School Psychologists	14	32
Health Diagnosing and Treating Practitioners, All Other	18	29
Social and Community Services Managers	21	36
Emergency Medical Technicians and Paramedics	23	34
Physical Therapist Assistants	24	35
Mental Health Counselors	26	38
Health Educators	30	45
Counselors, All Other	31	49
Health Technologists and Technicians, All Other	32	43
Substance Abuse and Behavioral Disorder Counselors	34	44
Massage Therapists	40	46

Table 12**Occupations With High Retention Relative to Wages**

Occupation	Rank by Average Hourly Wage	Rank by Retention
Registered Nurses	12	3
Physical Therapists	13	2
Speech-Language Pathologists	15	5
Respiratory Therapists	16	4
Occupational Therapists	17	6
Radiologic Technologists	19	13
Dental Hygienists	22	1
Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	27	10
Surgical Technologists	28	12
Healthcare Social Workers	29	19
Medical and Clinical Laboratory Technicians	33	20
Opticians, Dispensing	35	27
Medical Equipment Preparers	36	28
Billing and Posting Clerks	38	31
Dental Assistants	43	24
Pharmacy Technicians	44	9
Nursing Assistants	45	22
Medical Secretaries	46	40
Psychiatric Technicians	47	37