

Delaware Health Force:

A Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Healthcare Workforce and Access Challenges

Nicole Sabine

Research Associate, Delaware Health Force

Introduction

The Delaware Health Force (DHF) initiative¹ was presented by Nicole Sabine on behalf of the Delaware Academy of Medicine | Delaware Public Health Association (Academy/DPHA) at the 2024 APHA Annual Meeting & Expo. The healthcare workforce in Delaware faces significant challenges, amplified by a rapidly aging population and increased chronic disease prevalence, particularly in Sussex County, which has become a popular retirement destination. Additionally, the healthcare workforce itself is aging, placing further strain on Delaware's healthcare infrastructure. With healthcare costs approaching 20% of U.S. GDP,² the economic burden compounds workforce demands.

The Delaware Health Force (DHF) was developed in 2020 to address these challenges comprehensively by supporting workforce retention, improving healthcare outcomes, and fostering a data-driven approach to future policy and resource allocation. DHF is a public-private partnership between the State of Delaware and the Academy/DPHA. Seed funding for DHF was provided by the Delaware Health Care Commission and internal endowments from Academy/DPHA, while major grant funding has been supplied by the State of Delaware's Department of Labor through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) pandemic relief funds.

DHF's Multi-Pronged Approach

Core Workforce Data & Research

To address healthcare workforce challenges accurately, DHF aggregates extensive data to map population trends, provider distribution, and geographic accessibility. Data sources include the Delaware Professional Regulation Online Service (DELPROS),³ Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS),⁴ the Delaware Health Information Network (DHIN),⁵ and Delaware Health and Social Services (DHSS).⁶ Using Salesforce, with Agile Cloud Consulting as an integrator, DHF houses all data in a streamlined, accessible format that aligns with the state's broader data management systems.

The Core Workforce Data & Research initiative provides near-real-time insights to guide policy and resource allocation. Three main dashboards support this function: Licensed Workforce Charts & Graphs,⁷ which track licensure status across various specialties; the Delaware Health Force Mapping Explorer,⁸ offering ZIP Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA)-level data to highlight provider availability per capita; and Employed Workforce Data, Maps & Charts,⁹ displaying job trends, median salaries, and job postings. Together, these tools enable a dynamic response to evolving workforce challenges.

Graduate Medical Education Expansion

DHF, in collaboration with the Delaware Health Sciences Alliance and ChristianaCare, focused on expanding graduate medical education (GME) to increase the number of trained healthcare professionals in Delaware. Prioritizing underserved regions such as Kent and Sussex counties, the initiative aimed to fill gaps by creating more training positions for medical residents, advanced practice clinicians, and allied health providers, with an emphasis on behavioral health. At the completion of this arm of the program in 2024, these efforts led to 21 new health practitioners providing care across Delaware. GME expansion also supported additional training in palliative care, dementia care, and education for healthcare providers serving homeless populations. The rapid implementation, made possible by ARPA funding, allowed for an immediate workforce response and improved healthcare service access across Delaware.

Youth Health Literacy & Career Exploration

Youth-focused initiatives are central to DHF's long-term strategy to build a robust healthcare workforce pipeline. The Delaware Mini Medical School,¹⁰ running since 2009, offers a free, six-week educational series open to students from middle school to undergraduates, although all ages are welcome. Participants gain insight into health topics, diagnostic trends, and emerging fields within healthcare, supporting informed career exploration. Expanding on this model, DHF launched the Delaware Youth Medical Academy (DYMA), a new merit-based program specifically for middle and high school students, offering both virtual and in-person workshops that immerse them in real-world medical experiences and college/career readiness guidance.

Between 2023 and October 2024, the Mini Medical School welcomed over 3,000 registrants across five cohorts, with 63% of attendees indicating that the program positively influenced their career or academic choices. Together, these initiatives are cultivating a future healthcare workforce by engaging Delaware's youth and encouraging them to consider healthcare career pathways.

Health Care Student Loan Program

The Health Care Student Loan Program is designed to address immediate workforce shortages by providing financial support to healthcare students in Delaware.¹¹ Funded by ARPA, the program offers annual loan amounts between \$2,500 and \$15,000. The loans are interest-free while students remain enrolled in eligible programs, which include nursing, medicine, behavioral health, allied health, and other healthcare-related degree or certification programs. Repayment options vary by degree type, with certification programs requiring 1-3 years, associate and bachelor's programs requiring 5-7 years, and doctoral programs requiring 7-11 years. Graduates may qualify for further interest-free repayment if they remain in Delaware, work in an approved healthcare role, and contribute to Delaware's workforce for a set period. This program incentivizes healthcare students to remain in the state and support underserved communities, addressing both present and future workforce demands.

Conclusion

The Delaware Health Force initiative represents a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to addressing the healthcare workforce challenges faced by Delaware. With a targeted combination of real-time data analytics, expansion of graduate medical education, youth engagement, and financial support, DHF is tackling both immediate workforce shortages and long-term needs.

This strategy is particularly responsive to the state’s aging population and the growing demand for healthcare services.

While the use of ARPA funding has enabled rapid implementation of the programs within this initiative, ensuring their sustainability will require continued investment and strategic partnerships. Additional challenges include expanding the scope of the student loan program and further integrating data systems.

Despite these challenges, the effectiveness of the DHF model suggests that it could serve as a replicable framework for other states grappling with similar healthcare workforce and access challenges. With ongoing commitment and collaboration, DHF offers a promising path forward to addressing Delaware’s healthcare workforce needs and ensuring that its residents have access to high-quality care in the future.

Ms. Sabine may be contacted at nsabine@delamed.org.

References

1. Delaware Health Force. (2024, October 12). *Delaware Health Force*. Delaware Health Force - Health Care Work Force Data and Action. <https://dehealthforce.org/>
2. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services’ (CMS) Office of the Actuary. (2024, July 12). *CMS releases 2023-2032 national health expenditure projections*. CMS.gov. <https://www.cms.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cms-releases-2023-2032-national-health-expenditure-projections>
3. Delaware Professional Regulation Online Service (DELPROS). (n.d.). *License Look-Up*. eLicense Professional Licensure. https://delpros.delaware.gov/OH_HomePage
4. U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (n.d.). NPPES NPI Registry. <https://npiregistry.cms.hhs.gov/search>
5. Delaware Health Information Network. (2022). Delaware Health Information Network. Dover. <https://dhin.org/>
6. Delaware Health and Social Services - State of Delaware. (n.d.). Delaware Health and Social Services. <https://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/index.html>
7. Delaware Health Force, & Agile Cloud Consulting. (n.d.). *Licensed Workforce Charts & Graphs*. Delaware Health Force. <https://delawareacademyofmedicineandthedel.my.site.com/>
8. Delaware Health Force, & Tech Impact. (n.d.). *Delaware Health Force mapping (explorer)*. Delaware Health Force. <https://dhf-dashboard.pages.dev/>
9. Delaware Health Force, & eImpact. (n.d.). *Employed Workforce Data, Maps & Charts*. Delaware Health Force. <https://delamed.eimpactv3.com/dashboards/273/delamed/del-health>
10. Delaware Academy of Medicine & Delaware Public Health Association, & Delaware Health Force. (n.d.). Delaware Mini Medical School. <https://delawareminimed.org/>
11. Delaware Academy of Medicine & Delaware Public Health Association, & Delaware Health Force. (n.d.). *Health Care Student Loan Program*. Delaware Academy of Medicine & Delaware Public Health Association. <https://delamed.org/student-financial-aid/financial-aid-2023-workforce-initiative/>

Copyright (c) 2024 Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.