

Southwest Georgia Nursing Workforce Report Executive Summary

February 2021

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Data

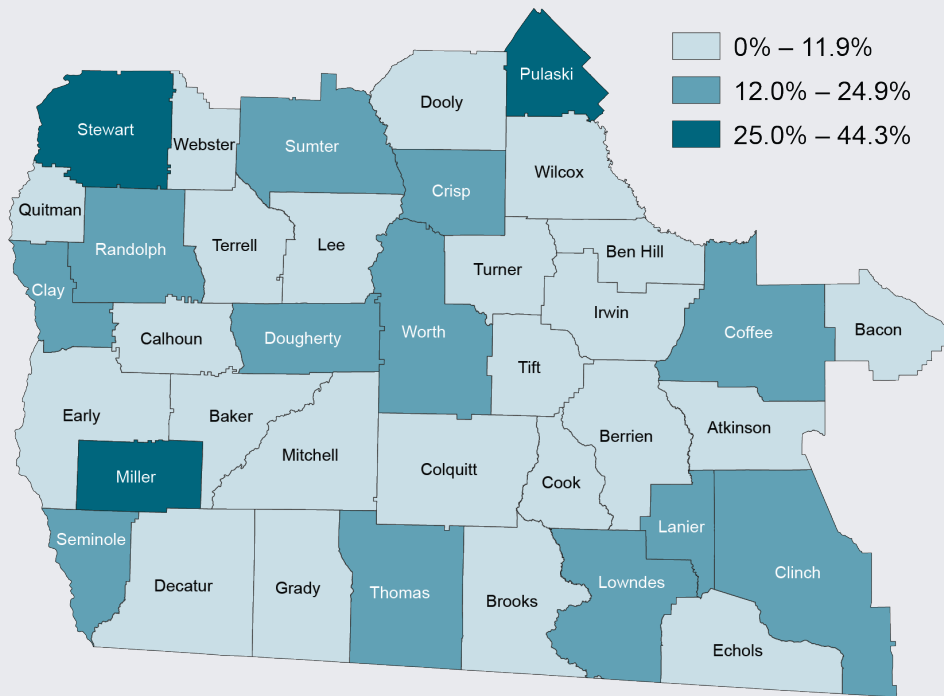
Education and Employment

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- + *Health care firms employ over 40,000 individuals in Southwest Georgia*
 - + *The majority of health care job openings in the region are for nurses*
 - + *Health care occupation projections for the state and region are similar*
 - + *Over the past decade, the number of nursing-related graduates in Southwest Georgia has remained stable*

01

+HEALTH CARE FIRMS EMPLOY OVER 40,000 INDIVIDUALS IN SOUTHWEST GEORGIA

Health Care Employment as a Percentage of Total Employment, 2019



Health Care Employment by County, 2019

County	Jobs	County	Jobs	County	Jobs
Lowndes	10,076	Seminole	470	Irwin	229
Dougherty	8,375	Lee	462	Terrell	173
Thomas	3,892	Early	429	Turner	157
Coffee	2,255	Grady	429	Calhoun	102
Tift	1,761	Randolph	410	Atkinson	102
Sumter	1,650	Worth	407	Clay	101
Colquitt	1,399	Bacon	402	Wilcox	81
Crisp	1,304	Berrien	399	Dooly	81
Pulaski	853	Stewart	379	Baker	26
Miller	792	Brooks	332	Echols	2
Decatur	745	Clinch	322	Quitman	1
Mitchell	570	Cook	320	Webster	0
Ben Hill	478	Lanier	289		

Sources: EMSI, Inc.; Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note: These are the best estimates for the number of health care employees in each county. They are based on administrative data such as unemployment insurance records and surveys data collected by the US Census Bureau. Data quality may vary due to federal privacy regulations and data disclosure standards.

+THE MAJORITY OF HEALTH CARE JOB OPENINGS IN THE REGION ARE FOR NURSES

Health care employers in Southwest Georgia reported 780 open positions in late 2019 and early 2020. Over 60% of vacant positions were for registered nurses (ASN/BSN).

Nursing Occupation	Current Staffing	Current Openings	Job Vacancy Rate	2025 Projected Staffing	2020-2025 % Change
Certified Nursing Assistant	889	126	12%	1,089	22%
Licensed Practical Nurse	945	131	12%	1,180	25%
Registered Nurse, ASN	2,504	387	13%	2,987	19%
Registered Nurse, BSN	936	118	11%	1,152	23%
Nurse Practitioner	287	18	6%	361	26%
Total All Occupations	5,561	780	12%	6,769	22%

Source: SOWEGA AHEC Survey of Major Health Care Employers

Note: Data collected November 2019-February 2020. COVID-19 has impacted staffing needs and the availability of health care employees.

Note: Health care employers reported having an additional 312 positions filled through travel/contract staffing arrangements. Over 80% of these travel/contract positions were for registered nurses (ASN or BSN).

+ HEALTH CARE OCCUPATION PROJECTIONS FOR THE STATE AND REGION ARE SIMILAR

State of Georgia

Occupations	2016 Base Employment	2026 Projected Employment	Annual Labor Force Exits	Annual Occupational Transfers	Annual Change in Employment	Annual Occupational Openings
Registered Nurses	73,840	87,350	2,310	1,750	1,350	5,410
Nurse Practitioners	4,290	5,940	100	150	170	420
Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	26,370	29,340	980	970	300	2,250
Nursing Assistants	36,780	42,600	2,410	2,010	580	5,000

SOWEGA AHEC Georgia Region

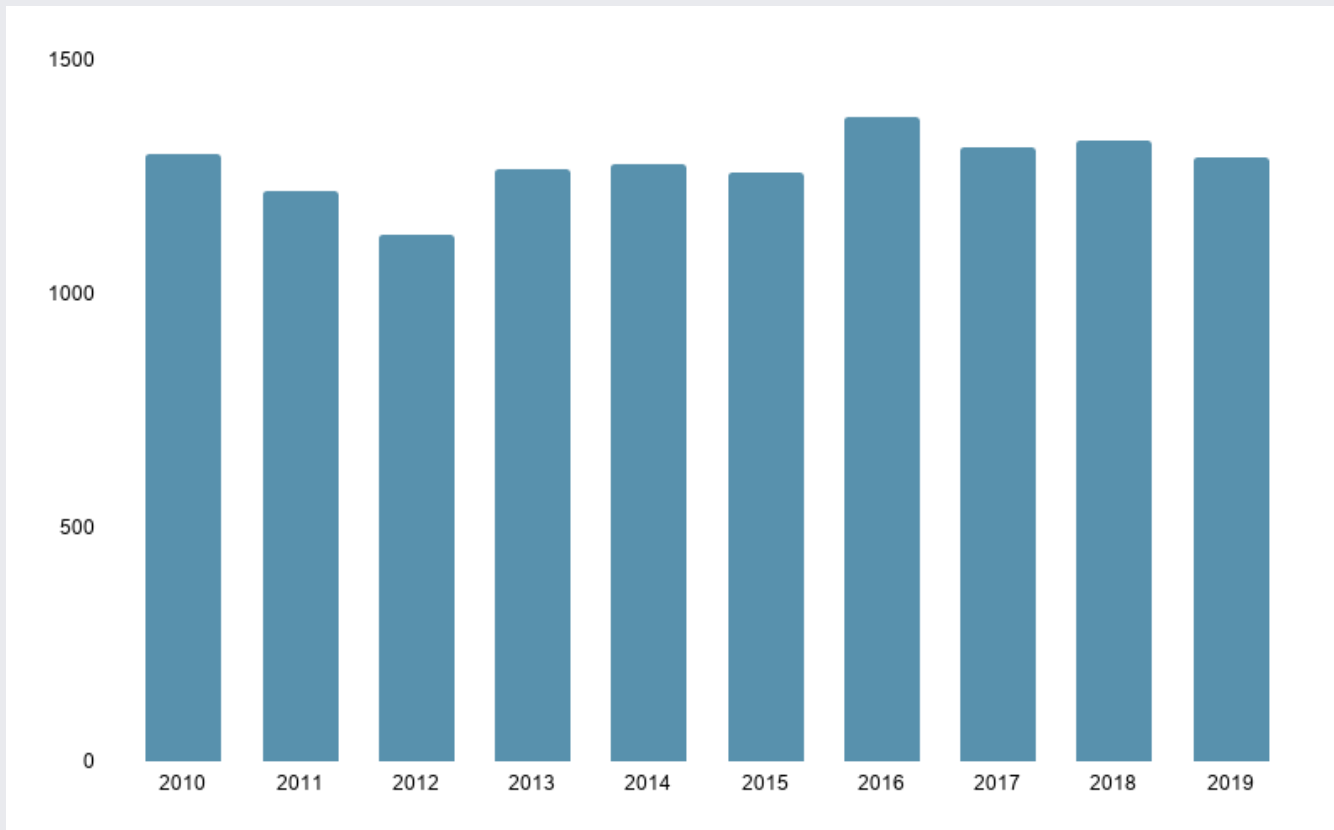
Occupations	2016 Base Employment	2026 Projected Employment	Annual Labor Force Exits	Annual Occupational Transfers	Annual Change in Employment	Annual Occupational Openings
Registered Nurses	5,190	5,960	160	130	70	360
Nurse Practitioners	380	520	10	10	10	30
Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	3,250	3,580	120	120	30	270
Nursing Assistants	2,960	3,330	190	160	30	380

The South Georgia region includes Local Workforce Development Areas 17 (Southwest GA) and 18 (Southern GA).

Source: Georgia Department of Labor

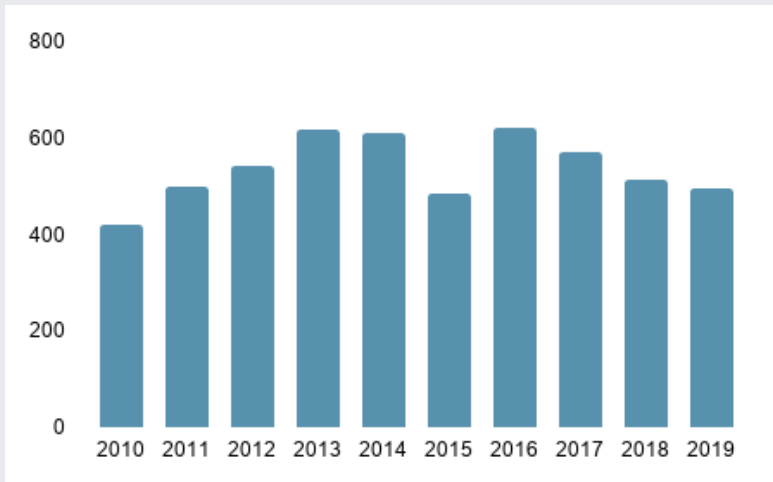
+OVER THE PAST DECADE, THE NUMBER OF NURSING-RELATED GRADUATES IN SOUTHWEST GEORGIA HAS REMAINED STABLE

Southwest Georgia has averaged 1,274 total ASN, BSN, CNA, and LPN degrees awarded over the past decade. The trends differ at the degree level.

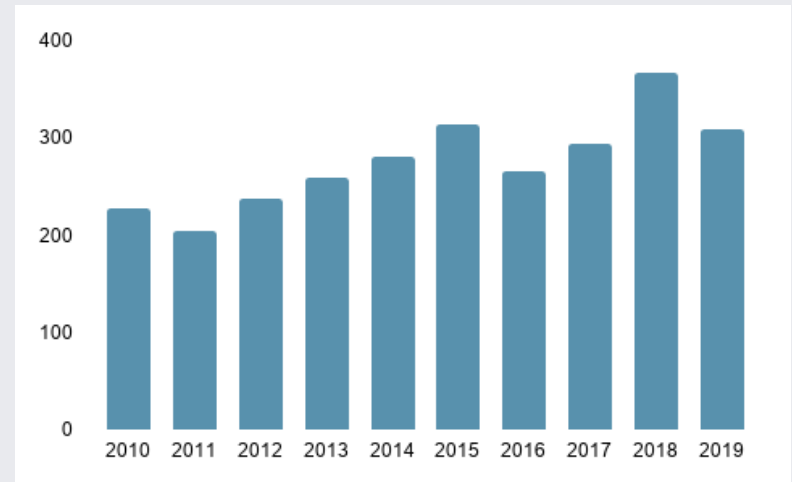


Source: EMSI, Inc; US Department of Education IPEDS

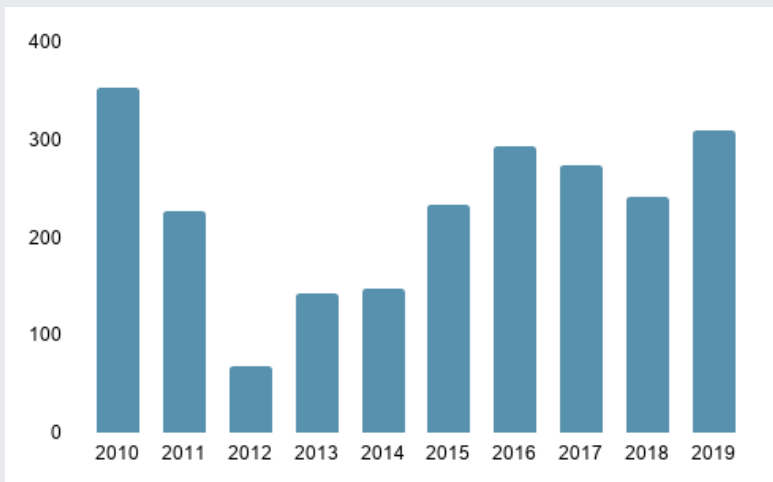
ASN Degree Production Has Been Declining Since 2012-2017.



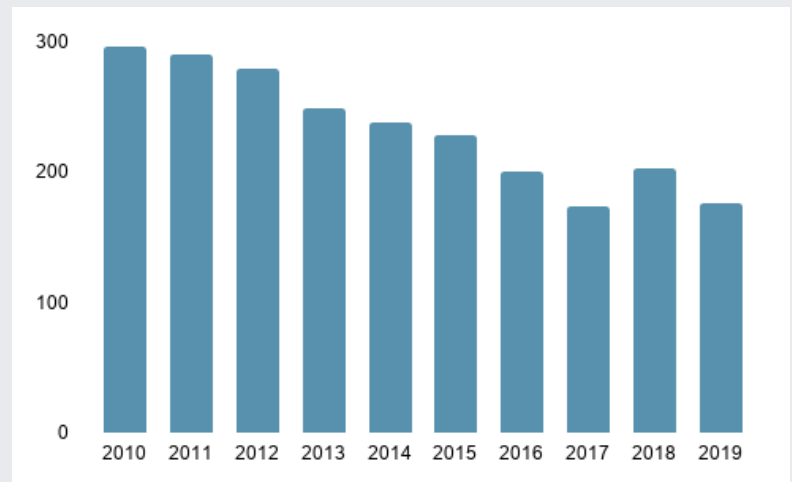
BSN Degree Production Has Increased over the Past Decade.



CNA Degree Production Has Varied but Has Stabilized in Recent Years.



The Number of LPN Graduates Has Declined over the Past Decade.



Preparation

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- + *Nursing programs are being pulled in a variety of directions*
 - + *Recruiting and retaining qualified students is a challenge for some health care programs*
 - + *The nursing student experience is complicated*

02

+ NURSING PROGRAMS ARE BEING PULLED IN A VARIETY OF DIRECTIONS

Nursing programs in Southwest Georgia have many stakeholders; many of which have competing interests. This makes it hard to design a quality program that fulfills all needs.

Students

While some nursing students are fresh out of high school, it is common to have **nontraditional students** in nursing. These students may come to the program with different skills or need additional supports. Regardless of their situation, students would like to see **additional clinical opportunities**.



Institution

Every program is part of a larger institution that has **admissions requirements and program expectations**. Sometimes these **are at odds** with what is best for the nursing program.

Resource limitations (e.g., staffing, budget, technology) impact health care training program delivery. A commonly cited issue was that nursing **faculty pay** was not competitive compared to the private sector.

Instructors

Instructors are required to teach a very full curriculum. Nurse instructors noted that there is too much to cover when you consider the knowledge needed to pass the NCLEX as well as the need to acquire clinical skills, and other soft skills. This has resulted in an emphasis on **passing the NCLEX rather than teaching practical skills**.



+RECRUITING AND RETAINING QUALIFIED STUDENTS IS A CHALLENGE FOR SOME HEALTH CARE PROGRAMS

One barrier to growing the health care workforce in Southwest Georgia is that students are not prepared to enter health care programs or are dropping out before graduation.

Illustrative feedback from health care education leaders

*“We really don't have an issue with getting students —**keeping them in the program** is one of the biggest issues.”*

*“Increasingly, students are **not able to meet the minimum admissions requirements.**”*

Recruitment

Most postsecondary education institutions and half of major area health care employers reported **having programs and outreach activities to build the health care talent pipeline.**

Most Southwest Georgia postsecondary institutions do not grant **admission priority to students from the region.**

Readiness

Many students **do not meet the minimum admissions requirements** for programs.

Some students are **not prepared for the rigor of nursing courses**, especially math courses.

Secondary education is not fully preparing students for success in health care programs. Students are highly proficient with technology, but many struggle with research, critical thinking, and reading for information.

Retention

Many health care students face **barriers and distractions from outside the classroom** that impact retention. Commonly cited barriers included paying for school, employment while in school, child care, and transportation.

Postsecondary institutions take an **active role in supporting student retention** through tutoring, support programs, scholarships, and other resources.

+ THE NURSING STUDENT EXPERIENCE IS COMPLICATED

While many nursing students feel that their program is adequately preparing them to be a high-quality nurse, there is more to consider.

The student perspective is pivotal to understanding the larger nursing workforce ecosystem. The following themes were developed from a listening session with nursing students from a variety of Southwest Georgia institutions.

Financial support is important. Many students rely on outside funding, including WIOA, tuition reimbursement, scholarships, extern programs, and more. While traditional education programs are Monday through Friday, 8 am–4 pm, it could be very beneficial for students to have **night or weekend clinical shifts to understand the expectations of the field.**

Clinical requirements and terminology differ greatly from institution to institution, even within the same program. Not only do the requirements differ between institutions, but the training **experience can differ a lot based on the RN** assigned to the group during rotations or the preceptor. It can be **hard to get enough experience in the classroom** even with a lower student to instructor ratio.

Finally, a glossary of terms (e.g., extern program, residency, etc.) maybe helpful in ensuring that students from different programs and the variety of employers are all on the same page.



Transition

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- + There is a gap between the skills taught in postsecondary and the skills required for workplace success*
 - + Starting a new role can be challenging, especially for nurses*
 - + Transition programs can help stop leaks in the pipeline*

03

+THERE IS A GAP BETWEEN THE SKILLS TAUGHT IN POST-SECONDARY AND THE SKILLS REQUIRED FOR WORKPLACE SUCCESS

Students may complete health care programs **without sufficient hands-on clinical training experience**. The ratios during clinical experiences may limit the amount of hands-on training completed in common procedures such as inserting an IV or catheter.

One key transition factor for employers to understand is that **schools are teaching overall nursing skills and competencies, not organizational or unit-specific information**. New nurses look to their employer to provide this information.

Finally, new nurses reported being told to “forget what you learned in the book and do it this way,” which can be frustrating and further demonstrates the skill gap between classroom education and on-the-floor nursing.



Health care human resources leaders reported the following most sought-after traits in new recruits:

- *Critical thinking*
- *Willingness to take initiative*
- *Interpersonal skills*
- *Empathy*

+ STARTING A NEW ROLE CAN BE CHALLENGING, ESPECIALLY FOR NURSES

Transitioning from the classroom to patient care can be hard for newly graduated nurses.

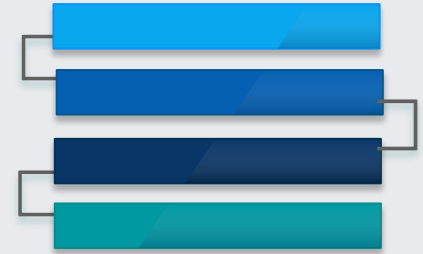
The “realities of nursing” tend to be very different from what a student experienced while in school. The biggest hurdles that many nurses noted was the patient load and time expectations of new nurses. There is a learning curve to understand this, and employers need to be supportive during this transition time. New nurses reported that the their preceptor experience was critical to their transition and success in their new role.

11 of 18 participating major health care employers had a formal transition program for new nursing employees.

Employers should consider **providing both orientation and training** when a new nurse is hired. It is essential for all new nurses to have both an organizational orientation and more specific training on their role and expectations. The length and formality may vary greatly, depending on the position. Some sort of mentorship between an experienced nurse and a nurse that is just onboarding with the organization can also be helpful.

+ TRANSITION PROGRAMS CAN HELP STOP LEAKS IN THE PIPELINE

A variety of programs exist that can help nurses transition from one phase of life or career to the next.



Local Pipeline Programs

Workforce success is built on a pipeline that **starts early**, in middle school, with exposure to jobs and careers in health care. It usually continues with **local high school Career, Technology, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) pathways**, which usually result in some sort of credential. From there, students can **flow into postsecondary education or the workforce**. Ensuring the transitions between each of these steps are as seamless as possible is imperative.

Ladder/Bridge Programs

It is important for employees to know what their career pathway is and what local ladder or bridge programs can help them accomplish their goals. Programs that are **clearly articulated between postsecondary institutions and employers** are key.

Ladder and bridge programs can allow EMS, LPN, and others to get their ASN degree or for ASN nurses to get their BSN degree. These programs can also be helpful for military medics looking to transition to civilian work.

9 of the 18 employers surveyed reported having a pipeline program. Such programs can vary greatly in scope and complexity.

Retention

-
- + *Retention is vital for a strong health care sector*
 - + *Incentives can be helpful in retaining quality nurses*
 - + *But incentives are not the only thing that matters*

04

+ RETENTION IS VITAL FOR A STRONG HEALTH CARE SECTOR

Turnover or filling open positions with agency nurses can be costly. So understanding why employees are leaving and how big of a problem turnover is can help organizations increase their retention.

Why are employees leaving?

According to HR leaders, the most common reason for employee turnover is **money**, followed by **workload**, **work-life balance**, **overwhelmed employees**, **unprepared employees**, and **shift length**.

How big of a problem is it?

Currently, there are 780 nurse (CNA, LPN, RN, NP) openings across all Southwest Georgia employers, and that number is expected to increase as the capabilities of medical facilities increase over the next five years. If nurses continue to leave, the current job openings are not filled, and then there is no one in the pipeline to fill the expected job growth, the health care industry in Southwest Georgia could be looking at a gap of almost 3,000 employees or over 30% of its workforce.

Nursing Occupation	Current Staffing	Expected Capability 2025	Discrepancy
Certified Nursing Assistant	889	1,089	200
Licensed Practical Nurse	945	1,180	235
Registered Nurse, ASN	2,504	3,543	1,039
Registered Nurse, BSN	936	2,136	1,200
Nurse Practitioner	287	361	74
Total All Occupations	5,561	8,464	2,748

+ INCENTIVES CAN BE HELPFUL IN RETAINING QUALITY NURSES

Incentives can come in a variety of forms. The incentives below can be especially impactful when used in combination to fulfill an employee's needs or desires.



Financial incentives are the first type that come to mind for most employers. When talking with regional employees, the most common or desired financial incentives were **sign-on bonuses** to encourage a new employee to commit to the organization and **loan repayment or continuing education support** for those looking to advance themselves within the field. Finally, there were a variety of comments about pay scales. Employers need to consider how **pay scales and pay caps** can impact morale for both new and long-time employees.

Health care is an industry that never stops; while nurses are aware of that, they strongly value **flexibility** where possible. Employees from the focus groups mentioned how incentives like **internal working pools, employment status changes, and sick leave** really made a difference to them. These incentives help promote work-life balance and the long-term happiness of an employee.

Many employees involved in the focus groups mentioned **additional support incentives** that they really appreciated or would like their employer to provide. These included an **employee assistance program, counseling or other mental health-related supports**, and even things like an **employee discount /payroll deduction for services and access to a gym or pharmacy**.

+ BUT INCENTIVES ARE NOT THE ONLY THING THAT MATTER

In Focus Group Sessions with nurses at a variety of Southwest Georgia medical facilities, employees were asked why they chose their current employer. Of those that responded, nearly

70%
cited reasons other than financial incentives.

For some nurses and nurse leaders in Southwest Georgia their employment decision is driven by incentives or location, but for most they are looking for something else.

For a number of respondents, the **organizational culture and leadership** was very important. One of the biggest themes within leadership was feeling that the leaders were accessible and approachable. For others they were looking at how the hospital or faculty **supported nurses by providing additional staff** like LPNs, CNAs, or others to help share the burden of patient care. Finally, a group of employees were very conscious of **company policies** and ensuring that they were being applied consistently and fairly when it came to full-time v part-time or new v existing employees.



Conclusion

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- + *Concluding thoughts*
 - + *Process and report overview*
 - + *List of regional postsecondary education nursing programs*
 - + *List of regional hospitals and community health centers*

05

+ CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Southwest Georgia faces a significant **gap between the number of nursing job seekers and employer demands**. The gap can differ significantly by employer as each has its own preferences for the level of certification desired. This report focuses on the larger nursing landscape across Southwest Georgia and finds **the biggest gap** within the workforce to be for the position of **registered nurse**.
- The region has a **variety of partners with health care training programs**. While there are programs to begin training students in high school, it can be challenging to incorporate them into the pipeline because many local employers will not allow students under 18 to work in their facilities. The largest challenges for postsecondary partners are recruiting qualified students and retaining them through graduation.
- The **transition from education to full-time health care sector employment is challenging**. The education experience does not necessarily mirror the conditions and expectations required for workplace success. This disconnect is particularly salient for those who are encouraged to go straight through to an advanced degree. Without hands-on experience along the way, it is very hard to be an entry-level nurse practitioner.
- **Retention is a challenge** across the board. Pay is certainly a factor in retention, but culture, employee support, and organizational policies are other top retention issues. Ensuring that employee expectations and organizational priorities are aligned is important for employee retention and when evaluating nurses on a regular basis.

+ PROCESS AND REPORT OVERVIEW

This executive summary was developed based on information collected by the Southwest Georgia Area Health Education Center to inform the region's nursing workforce strategy. These data included surveys and focus groups.



Two surveys were fielded in late 2019 and early 2020 with major health care employers in the region and postsecondary health care providers. Ten Academic Institutions and 19 Hospitals/CHCs completed and The survey data were initially analyzed by the Rural Health Innovation Center at the Mercer University School of Medicine.



Focus Group sessions with nurses, nurse leaders, nurse educators, and nursing students were held in Tifton, Valdosta, and Albany in January 2020. A total of **114** individuals participated from regional hospitals, community health centers, and post-secondary education nursing programs.



Note: Data collected November 2019-February 2020. COVID-19 has impacted staffing needs and the availability of health care employees.

This executive summary was developed for the Southwest Georgia Area Health Education Center by Greg Wilson and Rebecca McIver of the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government. Editing by Karen DeVivo.



**Carl Vinson
Institute of Government
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**

+ REGIONAL POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION HEALTH CARE PROGRAMS

	CNA	LPN	ASN	BSN	NP	DNP
Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College			✓	✓		
Albany State University			✓	✓	✓	
Albany Technical College	✓	✓	✓			
Andrew College			✓			
Coastal Pines Technical College	✓	✓	✓			
Georgia Southwestern State University				✓	✓	
Southern Regional Technical College	✓	✓	✓			
South Georgia State College			✓	✓		
South Georgia Technical College	✓	✓				
Thomas University				✓		
Valdosta State University				✓	✓	✓
Wiregrass Technical College	✓	✓	✓			

10 Academic Institutions completed the Survey and 7 participated in the Focus Group Sessions

+ REGIONAL HOSPITALS AND COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS

19 Hospitals & 4 Community Health Centers
Archbold Health System - Thomasville and Brooks, Grady & Mitchell County Hospitals
Bacon County Hospital and Health System - Alma
Clinch Memorial Hospital - Homerville
Coffee Regional Medical Center - Douglas
Colquitt Regional Medical Center - Moultrie
Crisp Regional Hospital - Cordele
Donalsonville Hospital, Inc.
Dorminy Medical Center - Fitzgerald
Greenleaf Behavioral Health Hospital - Valdosta
Irwin County Hospital - Ocilla
LifeBrite Community Hospital of Early - Blakely
Memorial Hospital and Manor - Bainbridge
Miller County Hospital - Colquitt
Phoebe Health System - Albany, Americus, Sylvester
South Georgia Medical Center - Valdosta, Berrien, Lanier
Southwell/Tift Regional - Tifton, Adel
Southwest Georgia Regional Medical Center - Cuthbert
Taylor Regional Hospital - Hawkinsville
Turning Point Hospital - Moultrie
Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) w/ 53 clinics
Albany Area Primary Health Care
CareConnect Health
Primary Care of Southwest Georgia
South Central Primary Care

**15 Hospitals and 4 Community Health Centers completed the Survey and
9 Hospitals and 2 Community Health Centers participated in the Focus Group Sessions**

+ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Thank you to everyone who completed surveys and participated in focus group sessions. The data and information you provided and is represented in the Executive Summary Report will be the basis of the upcoming Data Chats, Strategy Sessions and the Summit and used to measure the success of our efforts.



We look forward to collaborating with you in developing a long-term Regional Workplan to enhance the pipeline and increase the number of nurses committed to working in Southwest Georgia.

~ SOWEGA-AHEC

To stay up to date on the progress of the Regional Nursing Workforce Summit, visit the website <https://sowega-ahec.org/rnsummit/>