



HELP
WANTED

Dentists are having hard time filling gaps in staffing

by Joseph DeRosier

THE CHICAGO AREA STARTED TO EMERGE FROM THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WITH ILLINOIS ENTERING PHASE 5 of its Restore Illinois plan in early June. Gone were capacity limits on businesses as well as mask mandates. This is a precursor to employees leaving the work-at-home environment and heading back to office buildings as the economy starts humming and employers start looking at full staffing levels.

That is if they can find the workers. Dental offices had already seen a jump toward normal with a report from the ADA Health Policy Institute that as of May 17, more than 60% of all respondents to its survey said they were open

and experiencing business as usual.

A little over 38% said they were open but seeing lower patient volumes and less than a half-percent said they were closed and not seeing patients. And patient volume overall was reported by the institute at about 85% of pre-pandemic levels by early April.

But just like other businesses that are seeing more demand for their services, dental offices are reporting that they are struggling to find enough staff.

With patients returning and schedules filling up, the question is will CDS members have enough staff to meet the demand, especially with other businesses in a similar bind and willing to offer higher wages and benefits? Dental offices are not only competing with each other for workers, they are also in competition with other businesses to attract those who may have left the dental profession during the pandemic and are having second thoughts about returning.

According to a May poll from the ADA Health Policy Institute, 35.8% of owner-dentists are looking for dental assistants, another 28.8% are seeking dental hygienists, 26.5% need administrative staff and 13.1% are looking for an associate dentist to help treat patients. Those figures are up from poll numbers in October 2020.

Hiring dental hygienists and assistants is especially difficult, according to the poll, with 80% of respondents reporting recruiting for those positions to be “extremely or very challenging.”

Of dentists looking to hire a hygienist, 66.3% said it was extremely challenging and 19.7% said it was very challenging. Similar responses came in for hiring dental assistants with 59.2% labeling it extremely challenging and 23.9% calling it very challenging.

Dawn Laveau, the human resources manager for the Grand Dental Group, which has eight suburban offices including locations in Aurora, Naperville and Franklin Park, said it has been “absolutely more challenging to secure good candidates for some of the positions offices are trying to fill.”

“Prior to the pandemic we had success in hiring dental professionals because we have a lot of good schools in

the Chicago area, which provided us access to connect with professionals at all levels on the clinical side,” she said.

“After the pandemic it has definitely made things more challenging. We had some employees who decided not to come back to work in the clinical setting during the pandemic and have opted to resign rather than come back (as the pandemic wanes), so we’ve had to fill those positions.”

Ms. Laveau said because the group is growing and expanding, finding even more staff is a challenge. The group has 150 employees including 20 doctors, 25 dental hygienists, and a central business support staff.

In late May, the group was looking to fill about 15 positions, a number that is higher than usual.

The group placed ads on various job boards, has used the *CDS Review* classified advertising section and is in regular contact with various academic institutions while looking for workers.

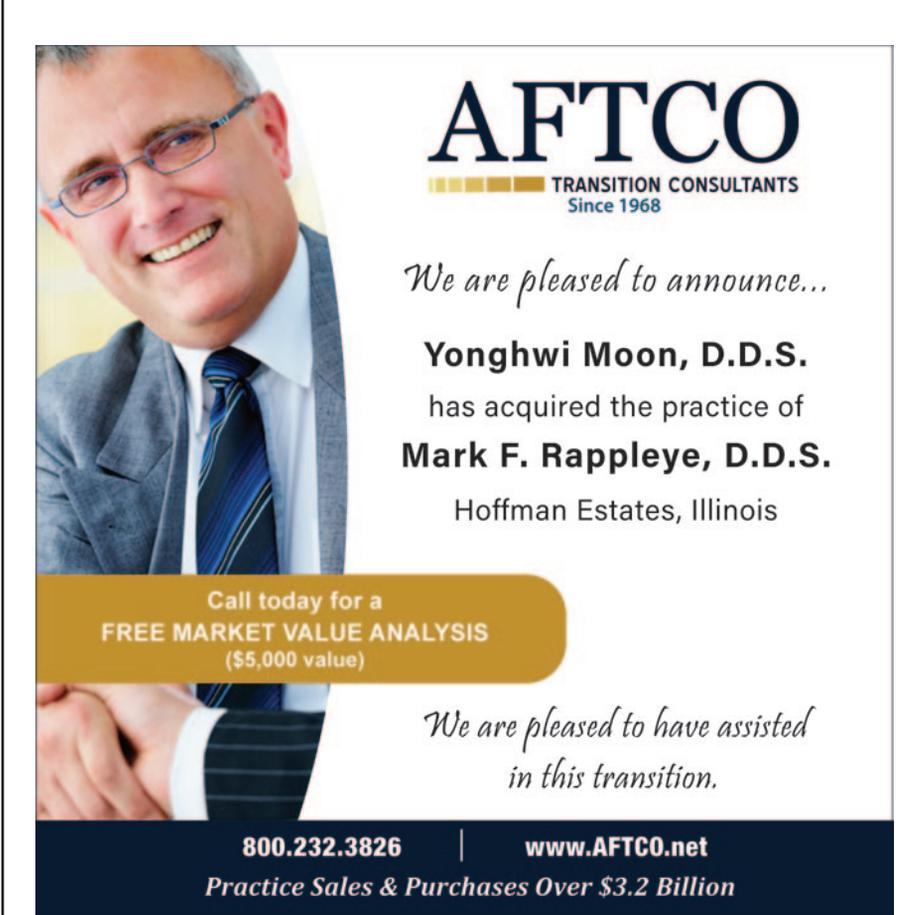
“We’ve been hearing that a lot of people are in the same place as us and looking to fill positions,” Ms. Laveau said.

Because of the competition, the office has altered its recruitment criterion.

For instance, Ms. Laveau said pre-pandemic the office would only hire a dental hygienist who had laser certification; now, Grand Dental will consider hiring someone without that skill and offer training for that certification. They are also considering dentist and hygienist candidates with less experience.

“We are going to be offering more mentoring and coaching bringing in someone who perhaps may not have quite the same level of experience as candidates in the past, but we are willing to work with them,” she said.

She said the group has a dedicated director of hygiene, who works with new hires, and since the group is doctor-owned and not run by a practice management firm they, along with other associates and a full-time clinical trainer,



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“Staffing had been a challenge prior to the pandemic, but we were managing it. I now make the statement that staffing will be the single biggest challenge facing the dental profession in the next five years.”

– Roger Levin, practice management consultant who heads the Levin Group

are working with new doctors to bring them up to speed.

So far pay levels have not been an issue in hiring, Ms. Laveau said, mainly because of what she called the group’s “generous compensation plan,” work hours that do not go deep into the evening and Saturday duty limits.

For instance, hygienists are paid an hourly rate plus a 27% commission on gross production as well as being part of a bonus program.

Laura Baus, the Illinois Dental Hygienists’ Association Legislative chair, said in a written statement that it was shown that following CDC guidelines allowed dental hygienists to work safely, yet she knows of some dental hygienists in the state who have opted to switch careers or retire early because of Covid-19 fears. She pointed to an ADA Health Policy Institute poll that showed of dental hygienists who left the profession voluntarily, 49.1% did not want to work until the pandemic was under control and 38.1% were concerned about adherence to workplace safety standards.

“Employers encountering challenges filling positions should assess the reasons for that difficulty,” Ms. Baus wrote. “An understanding and respect for dental hygienists’ education, abilities, and licensure is always important, however, it is critical during a time of crisis like the pandemic.”

She said she has heard from colleagues who were fired for refusing to work on patients without proper personal protective equipment or were threatened with dismissal for objecting to providing preventative care while CDC recommended only emergency dental care be performed.

“Now that most dental workers have

been fully vaccinated and the pandemic is waning, some will consider re-entering the workforce,” Ms. Baus wrote. “Those that felt disrespected and mistreated during the pandemic are wary.”

She wrote that employers need to offer more benefits, and beyond a fair compensation, they need to “strive to make staff feel respected and appreciated.”

“Employers can attract and retain productive staff members through good management techniques that minimize daily stressors and promote cohesive teamwork,” Ms. Baus wrote.

Ann Battrell, CEO of the American Dental Hygienists’ Association, said many experienced hygienists, about 8%, decided to leave the profession early in the pandemic by retiring early.

Those who didn’t leave but took a break and are now coming back did so mainly because of childcare issues, she said.

“This fall when schools fully reopen that will probably become less of a problem, but the big issue is getting families figured out again,” Ms. Battrell said. The profession remains heavily female, with only about 4% dental hygienists being males.

She said offices that fared best in keeping hygienists or attracting them were ones that had a high level of communication.

“Offices that were struggling were offices where communication was less effective,” Ms. Battrell noted. “People just need to talk to each other.”

Ms. Battrell said people react differently to fear.

“It’s really the human side of the practice of dentistry that we’ve got to remember,” she said. “We need to lean on each other, we need to be communi-

cating, and I think when hygienists are valued and consulted in the dental practice and everyone is weighing in on how things are going to be managed, we can get through this together.”

Roger Levin, DDS, a practice management consultant who heads the Levin Group, said staffing is a major component to success.

“Staffing had been a challenge prior to the pandemic, but we were managing it. I now make the statement that staffing will be the single biggest challenge facing the dental profession in the next five years.”

The ADA has recognized the problem and has established support resources for dentists facing staffing issues.

The ADA also has information and guidelines on managing the dental team, following a hiring process, leading a dental team during a pandemic and more at [ADA.org/Staff](https://www.ada.org/Staff).

The Council on Dental Practice has also developed flyers to help recruit people into allied dental careers.

The flyers are available at [ADA.org/AlliedCareerFlyers](https://www.ada.org/AlliedCareerFlyers) and can be personalized for individual practices. ■

Joseph DeRosier is the CDS staff writer.

CDS members answer governor's call for vaccine volunteers

GETTING THE COVID-19 VACCINES INTO AS MANY ARMS AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE WAS KEY to making it safe for everyday life to return from restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

Illinois Gov. J. B. Pritzker asked medical professionals, including dentists, to sign up as volunteers to expedite vaccine distribution. CDS members responded.

Numerous dentists signed on to volunteer to use their professional training and give the vaccine at vaccination centers around the Chicago area.

Two CDS members, both now retired from practicing dentistry, signed up as volunteers, took the necessary training class, and signed up with the Skokie Health Department to give the vaccine.

Susan Phillips of Skokie, a general practitioner who retired in 2000 and now works as an insurance consultant focusing on dental issues, said she volunteered to give vaccines after reading about the need for dental professionals to volunteer.

She had been helping the local food pantry sewing face masks but said giving vaccines was “a much better use of my skills.”

Starting in mid-March she turned her volunteering attention to giving vaccine shots at the Skokie Health and Human Services Department two days a week.

“I’ve probably at this point given about 500 vaccines personally. Skokie has a really efficient, well-run health department and they’ve been doing a great job” she said.

“Everyone is happy to be there,” Dr. Phillips said of those getting the vaccine. “Some people clearly are nervous, but the organization of the health department makes it an easy process.”

She said there are usually 15 vaccine stations set up and each station will have a vaccinators who needs to be a licensed health professional including nurses, retired physicians and some other dentists.

One of those dentists is a fellow Skokie resident Allan Klenetsky, who practiced as an oral surgeon in Oak Park for more than 40 years before retiring about three years ago.

Dr. Klenetsky said he read that health officials were looking for dental professionals to help give vaccines, and when he learned Skokie had its own health department he decided to volunteer.

He applied with the state program, took the one-hour required course and chose Skokie as his preferred location to volunteer. About three months later, in late March, he started working at the vaccination center.

“There’s a schedule put out about two or three weeks in advance and asks for medical volunteers,” Dr. Klenetsky explained. “I can pick and choose whether to vaccinate or load the syringes for vaccination. As a professional those are the two

positions I would want to do although I’m not limited, I could be out in the parking lot guiding cars but I thought the best use of my expertise would be in those two areas.”

He said it has been “wonderful” to get back into a clinical setting after being away for it for three years.

“It was delightful. I felt I was contributing right from the get-go, from the first injection to the last,” Dr. Klenetsky said. “I’m treating these people like they are my patients and I’m back in the office.”

Many CDS members signed up with the state to become volunteer vaccinators. Not all were called but many used their medical training to help get as many people as possible vaccinated.

The following is a list of those CDS members we know who signed up or actually did vaccinations. It’s not comprehensive so if you volunteered let us know by sending an email giving us your name, branch affiliation and whether you were able to become a vaccinator and we’ll add you to the list. CDS members who answered the call:

David Behm
Michael Biasiello
Paul Chaiken
Paul Fischl
Maria Freitas
Wayne Helge
Dan Hogan
Scott Hsia
Iwona Iwaszczyszyn
Bradford Johnson
John Kaminski
Ester Lopez
Radhika Maniar
Sharon Perlman
David Potts
Martha Proctor
Ray Sanai
Phil Schefke
Russell Schneider
Michael Shen
Joseph Silberman
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Kylke Tangney