

New Hampshire's Health Care Workforce Crisis Demands Breakthrough Thinking

New Hampshire's health care workforce shortage isn't temporary, it's systemic. Hospitals, behavioral health facilities, long-term care providers, community health centers and home health agencies compete for limited talent while facing burnout, an aging workforce and inadequate pipelines of new professionals.

Traditional approaches like recruitment fairs, sign-on bonuses and loan forgiveness programs remain essential. But these strategies alone won't change our trajectory. We need innovative approaches working alongside proven methods to create sustainable solutions.

HealthForce NH's 2026 Innovation Challenge is seeking bold solutions to New Hampshire's health care workforce crisis, offering up to \$100,000 for first place, up to \$60,000 for second place and up to \$40,000 for third place. Applications open January 21, 2026, with a deadline of March 4, 2026. But this competition is about more than awards, it's about building a community of innovators who refuse to accept that our workforce challenges are unsolvable.

True innovation means more than adopting modern technology or tweaking existing programs. It means delivering more value, better outcomes and greater access while requiring less cost, complexity and time from both employers and workers.

Real innovation challenges current constraints: fragmented funding, siloed sector efforts, regulatory barriers and struggling operational models. It asks: How can we remove barriers to health care careers across all education pathways? How can we leverage technology to reduce administrative burden? How can we create collaborative talent-sharing models? What retention strategies address burnout and support career longevity?

Innovation requires looking beyond health care's boundaries. What can we learn from other industries? How can we engage technology companies, community organizations and educational innovators in solving problems that health care can't solve alone?

Workforce innovation must address barriers preventing talented individuals from pursuing health care careers. Financial constraints, geographic isolation, limited educational access and other obstacles keep potential workers on the sidelines. A workforce reflecting New Hampshire's diversity isn't just aspirational, it's essential for patient-centered care.

The innovations we seek should create meaningful change across our health care landscape. Some ideas may start small, testing new approaches in a single community or organization. Others may be ready for broader implementation. What matters is thoughtful planning about sustainability, adaptability and partnerships that help ideas grow.

These challenges won't be solved by any single organization or approach alone. They require bold thinkers willing to reimagine entire systems, collaborative leaders ready to work across sectors and passionate innovators committed to creating lasting change. The most powerful innovations emerge when diverse partners collaborate across traditional boundaries.

If you have an idea that breaks through traditional constraints, now is the time to bring it forward. Whether you're an individual with breakthrough thinking, an established organization ready to try something transformative, or organizations joining forces to address workforce needs, we want to hear from you.

The Innovation Challenge offers more than funding. It provides mentorship, visibility and connections to health care leaders across the state. Semi-finalists will pitch their ideas at public events in April and winners will be announced April 15, 2026.

Learn more at healthforcenh.org/innovation-challenge. New Hampshire's health care future depends on the innovations we're willing to pursue today.

Maureen Znoj is Senior Director of HealthForce NH, an initiative of the Foundation for Healthy Communities. She lives in Bedford, NH.