

# THERE'S NO EASY FIX FOR SUPPLY-DEMAND MISMATCH IN LONG-TERM CARE

A failed LPN apprenticeship program reveals tough road ahead

BY CATHY DUCHAMP | cduchamp@bizjournals.com

While hospital nursing staff levels have rebounded, a sense of gloom hangs over the long-term care industry, which includes independent and assisted living and skilled nursing facilities and home care providers.

Licensed practical nurses have historically been the workforce for long-term care. They are certified to administer drugs, tests and treatment under the supervision of a registered nurse or nurse practitioner. The federal Health Resources and Services Administration projects by next year across Washington state, demand for LPNs will outstrip supply by 43%. By 2036, the agency estimates the percent adequacy will fall to 30%.

"Long-term care has always been the redheaded stepchild, and things just keep getting kicked down the road," said R. Kevin McFeely, president and CEO of Futura Age, a faith-based nonprofit that manages two communities in the Tacoma area that provide the full spectrum of long-term care.

McFeely said stakeholders may not be able to defer addressing staffing shortages much longer because of two factors. First, "the senior population is increasing by leaps and bounds. We have more people who need care." Second, he said, federal Medicaid cuts scheduled to take effect in 2027 will put pressure on state lawmakers to cut some long-term care benefits to help make up the gap.



Futura Age President and CEO R. Kevin McFeely

In 2023 the state funded a first-of-its-kind pilot apprenticeship program to build a pathway for certified nursing assistants to become LPNs. Six students began the program in October 2024. Four remain. But the apprenticeship will end with them due to untenable costs, said a spokesperson for the Washington Health Care Association, which developed and ran the program.

"The demand for qualified caregivers, including licensed practical nurses, is only growing as the population ages and we prepare for the senior population in Washington to nearly double by 2050," WHCA CEO Carma Matti-Jackson said. "Innovative programs that help support the nursing workforce are critically important and should be encouraged by state policymakers."

Many long-term care employers, including Futura Age, already offer some form of tuition reimbursement to support staff pursuing LPN credentials. The state distributes grants for CNAs who work at hospitals to become LPNs and RNs, but not those working in long-term care.

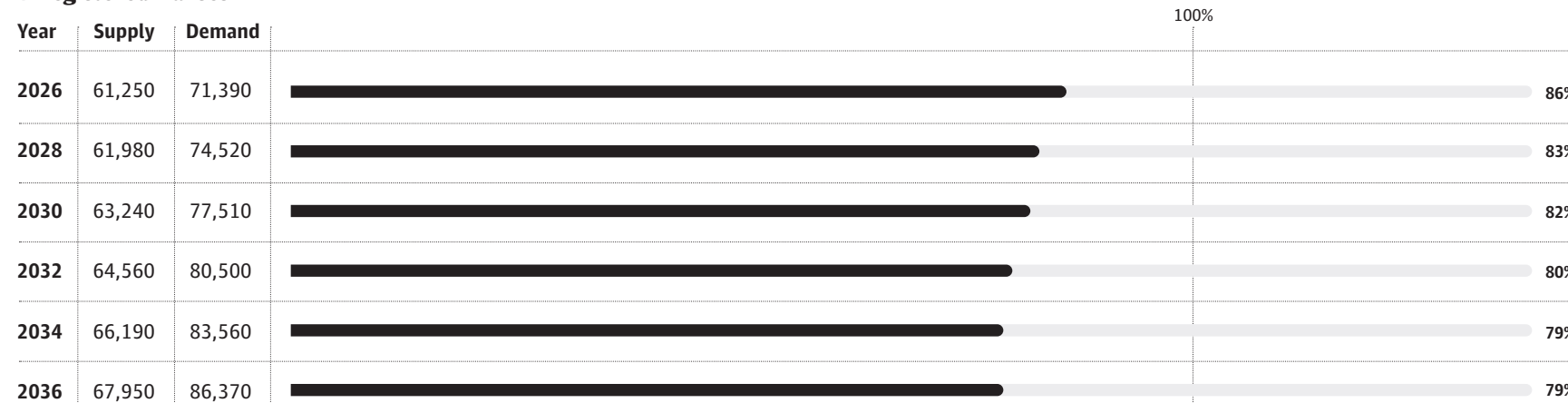
McFeely is not counting on government to help build his caregiver workforce. Instead, he offers staff flexible work schedules, internal promotion pathways and simple things to make employees feel appreciated.

"Basically investment and training, which is going to be the path that's going to basically create the pipeline to support our seniors going forward," he said.

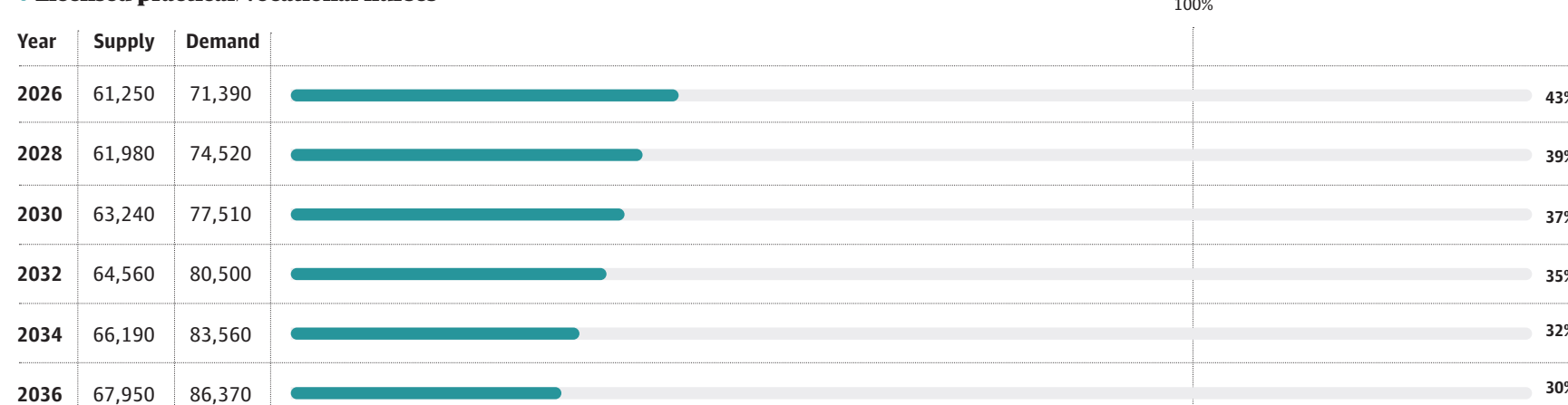
## PROJECTED NURSING NEEDS

Supply-demand forecast for full-time workforce statewide, 2026-2036:

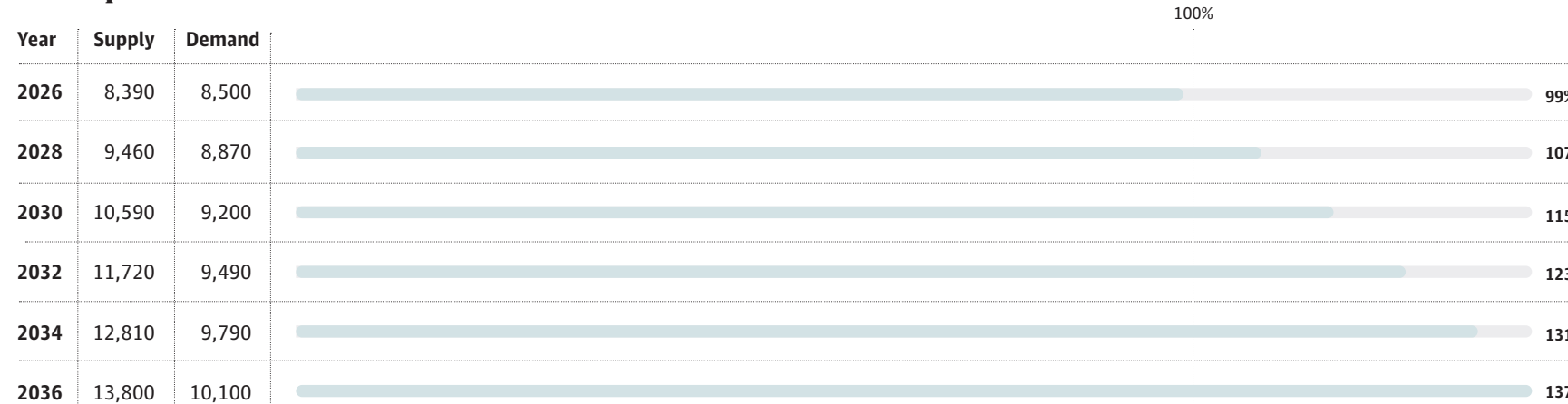
### Registered nurses



### Licensed practical/vocational nurses



### Nurse practitioners



SOURCE: HEALTH RESOURCES AND SERVICES ADMINISTRATION HEALTH WORKFORCE SIMULATION MODEL

# TOO MANY NPs — BUT THAT'S A GOOD THING

Projections for the next decade show a surplus of nurse practitioners who are expected to forge new models of care

One data point that stands out in an analysis of nursing workforce projections: By 2030, the supply of nurse practitioners in Washington will outstrip demand. By 2026, the NP surplus will be 37%, according to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration.

Not to worry, said Heather Coleman, chief nursing officer at Virginia Mason Franciscan Health.

"The projected surplus of nurse practitioners reflects the strength of our profession," she told the Business Journal in an email.

NPs have two to four years of graduate-level nursing education beyond an RN degree. In Washington, NPs can perform many of the functions primary care physicians do in other states. NPs have had full practice authority in Washington state since 2016, including for prescribing psychiatric medications.

In fact, more nurse practitioners may help bring down the cost of health care.

"Access to primary care in our state is a problem, and it's not good health care when you end up in an emergency department because you don't have a primary care doctor," said June Altara, chief nursing officer with MultiCare Health Systems.

According to the latest Washington state Board of Nursing workforce survey, more than 7% of NPs own and operate their own practices, with some specializing in high-demand fields such as gerontology and behavioral health. The 2025 estimated average annual salary for an NP in the greater Seattle area is almost \$149,000. That's a 17% increase since 2020.

"Having more nurse practitioners can expand access to care, especially in more rural and underserved areas, enhance continuity and coordination of care, and can potentially create new pathways for NPs," Coleman said.

— Cathy Duchamp



Virginia Mason Franciscan Health Chief Nursing Officer Heather Coleman

### Education

The most common degree or certification achieved per caregiver level:

75%

Nurse practitioners  
Master's degree

51%

Registered nurses  
Bachelor's degree

72%

Licensed practical nurses  
Certificate

SOURCE: WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF NURSING WORKFORCE SURVEY