



Pathways and Priorities in California's Healthcare Workforce

Insights from Black Women and Latinas



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Research Direction and Implementation

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This report is a joint effort of Hispanas Organized for Political Equality (HOPE) and Black Women Organized for Political Action (BWOPA-TILE).



Executive Summary

Healthcare workforce shortages in the United States are projected to increase substantially over the next two decades.¹ These shortages not only limit access to care but also threaten the health outcomes of the nation's growing aging population. In California, rising demand for health care - shaped by demographic shifts, the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for future public health preparedness - has heightened the urgency of strengthening and sustaining the healthcare workforce.

Addressing workforce shortages also requires examining who is represented within healthcare professions and how persistent challenges in access to training and career advancement contribute to these gaps. Despite comprising approximately 40% of the California population, Latinos represent only 16% of Registered Nurses. According to the California Health Care Foundation's 2023 Midwifery Workforce Snapshot, Latinas represent 12% of licensed midwives and 10% of licensed nurse-midwives. Similarly, Black women remain significantly underrepresented in healthcare professions both nationally and within California. Although Black Californians constitute approximately 5.3% of the state's total population, they account for only about 2% of licensed midwives and 4% of nurse-midwives. For decades, Black physicians have comprised only 3% to 3.9% of California's total physician workforce.²

These figures highlight the importance of closely examining structural barriers that limit the education, training, recruitment, retention and advancement of Black women and Latinas in healthcare careers. Across the healthcare career pipeline, from early exposure and education to workforce entry and professional advancement, Black women and Latinas encounter significant obstacles. They remain underrepresented across various healthcare disciplines, including family medicine, pharmacy, and dermatology, and experience disparities in compensation and access to advancement opportunities (Okoro et al., 2024).

Access to early healthcare career pathways is influenced by the affordability of healthcare education, with financial constraints, rising student debt,³ limited transfer pathways, and restricted seats in competitive programs such as nursing significantly reducing opportunities for access to healthcare fields. Beyond education and training, women often encounter challenges when transitioning into the workforce, including limited mentorship opportunities, a lack of paid training options, and competing family and caregiving responsibilities (Greer & Kirk, 2022).

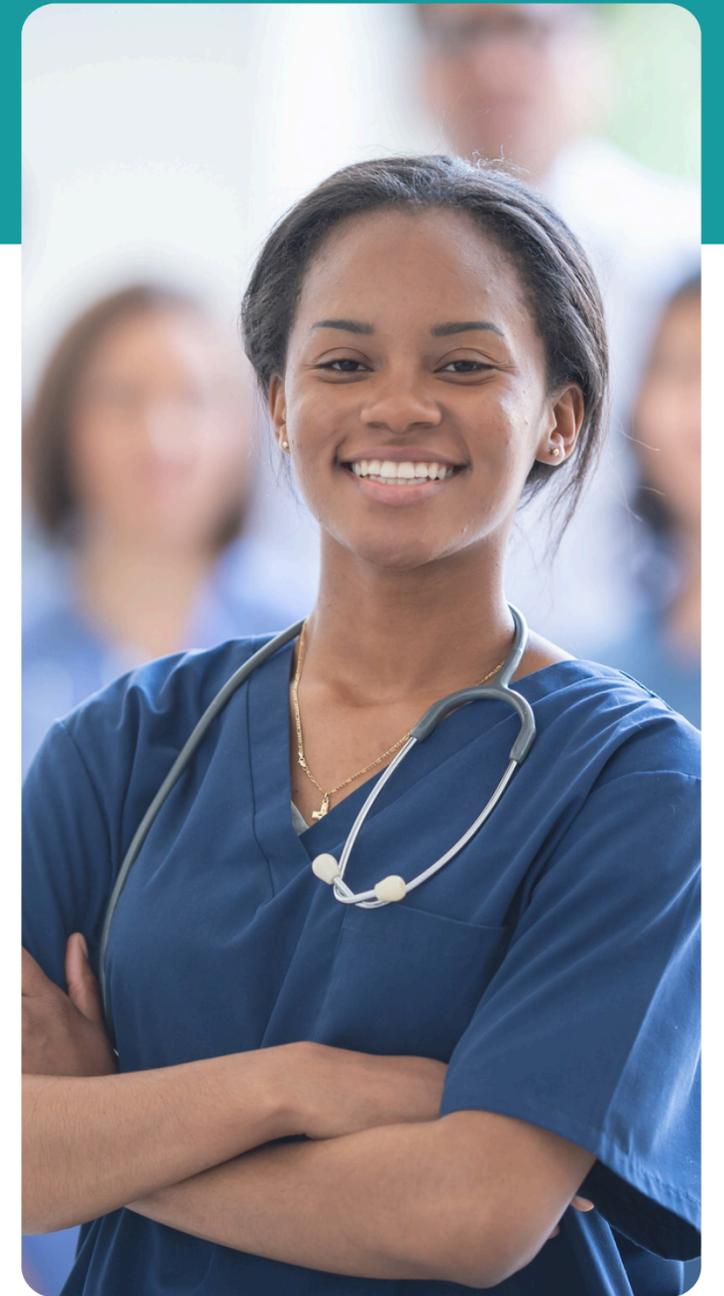
To better understand these experiences and elevate opportunities to turn insight into action, Hispanas Organized for Political Equality (HOPE) and Black Women for Political Action (BWOPA) commissioned EVITARUS, a California based public opinion research firm, to conduct quantitative and qualitative research to better understand their experiences, priorities and considerations of Black women and Latinas pursuing or considering careers in the healthcare field.

The resulting 2026 California Equity in Healthcare Workforce Development Report amplifies the voices and identified priorities of Black women and Latinas on career aspirations, opportunities, and experiences. The report draws from an online survey of 800 Black women and Latinas conducted from November 5-12, 2025, and two online focus groups among women who identify as Black, Latina or both. Together, these findings illuminate pathways toward building a healthcare workforce where talent is supported, valued, and able to thrive.

1. <https://nihcm.org/newsletter/rising-healthcare-workforce-shortage#hcworkforce>

2. <https://calmatters.org/commentary/2022/11/california-black-doctor-education-health-care/>

3. <https://csahq.org/2025/08/05/how-loan-policy-threatens-female-and-urim-anesthesiology-trainees/>



Key Findings

Limited advancement opportunities amid financial strain:

A large majority of Black women and Latinas in California feel there are too few opportunities for advancement, with financial pressures posing significant challenges. Nearly all cite the rising cost of living (98%) and housing affordability (95%) as major concerns. Four in ten report that reductions in financial aid programs (40%) or a recent job loss (41%) have negatively impacted their ability to pursue career goals.

Education and training systems are not meeting workforce needs:

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Black women and Latinas rate California's community colleges, public universities, and career or job training programs as only fair or poor in adequately preparing them for high quality opportunities and the jobs of the future, signaling misalignment between education systems and workforce pathways.

Mentorship gaps limit entry and persistence in healthcare careers:

Black women and Latinas report that the mentoring support meant to help them enter careers and the healthcare workforce is often inadequate or negative. More than half (56%) report having been discouraged from a family member, professor, counselor, or teacher from pursuing a particular career path. Among those interested in healthcare, only about half (49%) say they were encouraged to pursue a healthcare profession.

Trust and access shape healthcare career interest:

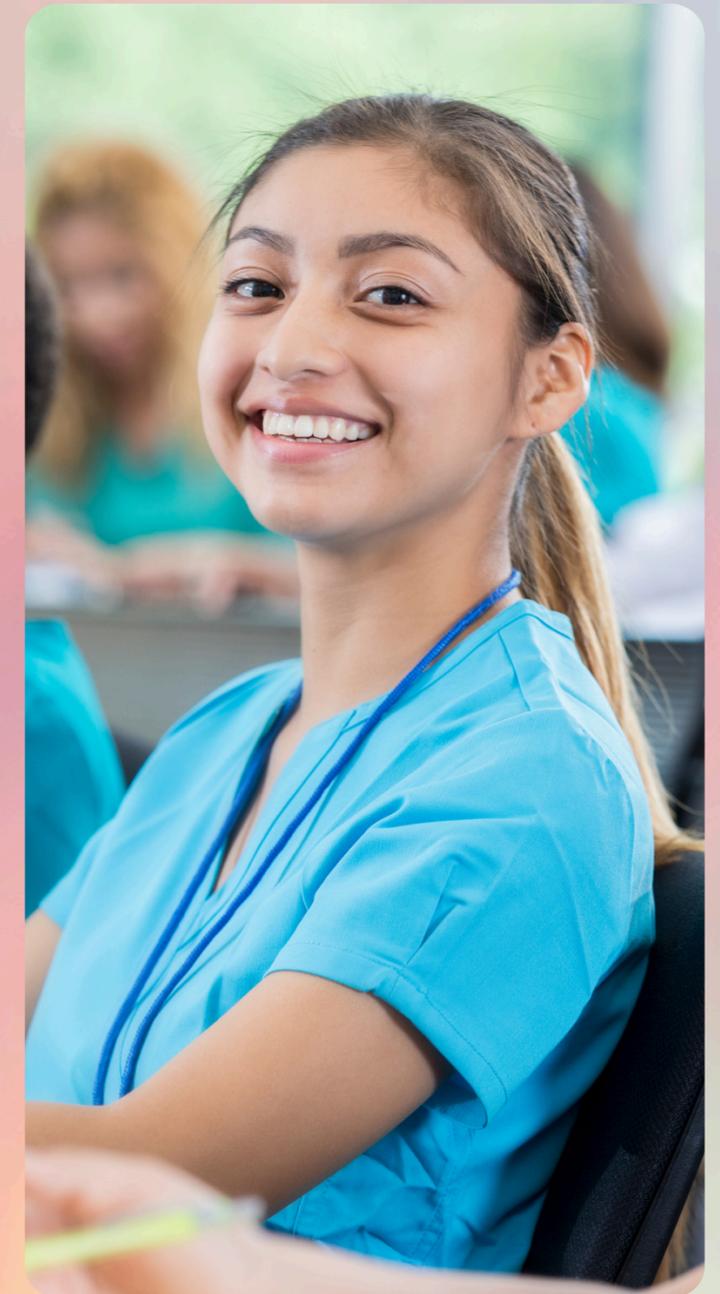
Among women who have regular access to a health care provider only one third (32%) trusted them a lot, while over two thirds of the women (63%) only trusted them a little or somewhat. More than half (57%) say that having greater access to a hospital, clinic or health care center closer to where they live where they could either study, volunteer or train would make them more interested in pursuing a healthcare career.

Healthcare careers are valued but perceived as demanding:

While more than three-quarters (80%) of Black women and Latinas feel that healthcare jobs are highly important for their local communities, 69% of these women also describe these jobs as very stressful and emotionally taxing.

Clear solutions emerge from lived experience:

Black women and Latinas consistently identify practical supports as critical to pursuing healthcare careers, including hands-on learning experiences to gain fieldwork exposure (92%), flexible class and internship schedules like night classes or online/hybrid formats (92%), and financial assistance such as scholarships and aid that cover childcare and transportation costs (90%).



Key Recommendations

Black women and Latinas face intersecting challenges driven by rising living costs and affordability, gaps in education and training systems, and underrepresentation in healthcare professions. Their experiences point to several priority actions for building a more equitable and representative healthcare workforce:

Expand financial supports to reduce economic barriers:

Increase financial aid, scholarships, and loan forgiveness programs, while addressing the broader cost-of-living pressures—particularly housing, childcare, and transportation—that limit the ability to pursue and persist in healthcare education and careers.

Simplify and strengthen pathways to healthcare degrees and careers—including early exposure and accessible training options:

Strengthen education-to-career pathways by investing in education and training programs aligned with workforce needs, including expanded transfer pathways, increased capacity in high-demand healthcare programs, and clearer connections between education, certification, and employment. Increase early exposure to healthcare careers through high school and postsecondary initiatives, hands-on learning experiences, and community-based programs. Provide flexible and locally accessible training opportunities that allow individuals to study, volunteer, and gain practical experience in healthcare careers, while broadening awareness of the full range of professions beyond commonly known roles.

Increase mentorship, paid training, and workforce supports:

Support programs that provide culturally responsive mentorship, paid internships, apprenticeships, and structured on-ramps into healthcare careers, with particular attention to flexible schedules and wraparound supports that address caregiving and work responsibilities.

