

# Pandemic Drove Greater Reliance on Locum Tenens Physicians: Survey

John McCormack

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Nearly 90% of healthcare organizations now employ locum tenens physicians and/or advanced practice professionals, according to a [new study from staffing firm AMN Healthcare](#). This overwhelming reliance on professionals who take on temporary work that lasts from 1 day to 1 year can — in part — be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the healthcare workforce.

Indeed, Jeff Decker, division president of locum tenens at AMN Healthcare, told *Medscape Medical News* that the pandemic "required physicians to think different. So that created a lot of movement."

Many physicians, for example, pivoted when COVID hit and took on part-time work or leveraged telemedicine, whereas some independent practitioners even folded their practices into large groups, Decker pointed out.

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## Exploring Emerging Options

Perhaps most notably, many physicians embraced locum tenens work as a way to deal with changes brought on by the pandemic. "Locums physicians have gone from being a novelty at many healthcare facilities not too long ago to a standard part of the staffing mix today," Decker said.



While the onset of the unprecedented health crisis caused this seismic shift in work attitudes, the need for temporary professionals in specific specialties is now bubbling to the top as the pandemic continues to play out, according to responses from 202 hospital, medical group, and other healthcare facility managers. For instance, 28% of these managers reported that their organizations relied on locum tenens anesthesiologists and/or certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) to fill staffing gaps while meeting the pent-up demand for surgeries during the past year.

"That's an indicator that procedures requiring anesthesia, which were depressed by COVID-19, are going back up and there are not enough anesthesia providers to go around," Decker said.

With COVID still a factor, the demand for hospitalists remains high as well, with 25% of respondents reporting their facilities used locum tenens hospitalists over the prior 12 months to meet the continued demand for inpatient care.



Jeff Decker

Finally, the need for mental health services, which was exacerbated by COVID, is sparking a demand for locum tenens mental health professionals, with 23% of managers surveyed saying their facilities had used locum tenens behavioral health specialists, compared with just 17.5% who reported using such locum tenens professionals in 2019.

The survey also highlights the fact that physicians now can choose from a variety of work options.

"It's important for physicians to realize it's a buyer's job market. They have a good opportunity to find the style of practice that suits them best, whether it be locums or some other option. One size no longer fits all and due to the doctor shortage, physicians can find options tailored to their needs," Decker said.

More specifically, physicians are discovering that they have many more options at various stages in their careers and can rely on locum tenens work to pinpoint exactly what they want. Residents, for instance, are embracing locum tenens work "to determine where they would like to work and...to test-drive various practice settings," Decker noted.

Mid-career physicians are using locum tenens work to "take a break and reassess where they really want to be," Decker said. "And, older physicians who aren't quite ready to sunset, they can semi-retire while doing what they really enjoy the most, which is seeing patients."

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## Discovering Strategic Organizational Advantages

The value of locum tenens staffing is not lost on healthcare leaders. According to the study results, 70% of managers surveyed indicated they use locum tenens physicians and other providers to maintain services while they seek to fill openings in their permanent staffs; 25% use them to meet rising patient demand; and 13% use them to address provider burnout, which has become more prevalent due to COVID-19.

"COVID has caused the industry to rethink many things, staffing in particular, since it has been such a challenge," Decker concluded. "Everyone wants to work smarter, which means staffing to the appropriate levels, while focusing on the well-being of physicians and other professionals. Locum tenens can help address both these needs and locums has emerged as an even more strategic staffing tool than it was prior to the pandemic."

*John McCormack is a Riverside, Illinois-based freelance writer covering healthcare information technology, policy, and clinical care issues.*

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