



STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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June 30, 2024

The Honorable Annette Cleveland, Chair
Senate Health and Long-Term Care Committee
Post Office Box 40466
Olympia, WA 98504-0466

The Honorable Marcus Riccelli, Chair
House Health Care and Wellness Committee
Post Office Box 40600
Olympia, Washington 98504-0600

Dear Senator Cleveland and Representative Riccelli:

I am submitting this information as required in [Engrossed Second Substitute Senate Bill \(E2SSB\) 5278](#) (Chapter 323, Laws of 2023), which states the Department of Health (department) must:

- Explore alternative testing options, such as remote testing, for home care aides.
- Conduct an annual evaluation of the examination results of applicants who complete the examination in a language other than English.
- Conduct a review of exam translations, if the department finds that applicants taking the examination in a particular language fail at disproportionately higher rates than other exam takers.
- In consultation with Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and other relevant participants, devise a system that reduces delays between training and testing for home care aides.
- In consultation with DSHS and other relevant participants, examine existing challenges related to lack of testing sites and develop a plan, including an estimation of costs, to expand testing sites.
- In consultation with DSHS and other relevant participants, establish:
 - Performance measures and data collection criteria to monitor the overall length of time between training and testing and number of available test sites;
 - Accountability mechanisms for the overall training to testing process; and
 - Performance-based contracts for vendors who administer the tests that include all performance measures expected, including a definition of what sufficient access to test sites entails, and detailed vendor costs.

The bill requires the department, in consultation with DSHS and other relevant participants, to submit to the Governor and the Legislature a preliminary report no later than June 30, 2024, and a final report no later than December 31, 2024. The reports must include a summary of the work conducted and any recommendations for improvement. This is a preliminary report, and the department will be including comprehensive recommendations in the final report in December.

Background

Home care aides are long-term care workers who are certified as a home care aide by the department. To become certified as a home care aide, a long-term care worker must complete 75 hours of training, pass the written and oral certification examinations, and pass state and federal background checks. As of May 2024, the number of active certified home care aides in Washington is approximately 31,000. Washington has historically struggled to build and maintain an adequate home care aide workforce. The home care aide program also carries an accumulated \$6 million deficit. Factors contributing to this deficit include:

- Lack of profession startup costs, which may include computers, testing supplies and equipment, training mannequins, facility rental, etc.
- The profession needing a high number of dedicated customer service staff,
- Contracting with an examination vendor,
- Providing the exams in multiple languages, and
- The department's inability to raise fees without impacting certification authority, as home care aides are a low-paying profession.

Washington's Initiative 1163 (2011) mandates biennial performance audits by the State Auditor's Office, leading to collaborative efforts between the department, DSHS, SEIU 775, and others to improve the home care aide testing process. Following 2016 and 2018 audit recommendations, the department revised the certification exam and was directed to enhance language support, update its website, and expand testing locations to facilitate certification.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted progress toward improvements for home care aid testing and examinations. Fewer people submitted home care aid applications, training and testing opportunities were delayed or canceled, and some training and test sites shut down completely. To mitigate these impacts, in March 2020, Governor Inslee suspended the requirement that most home care aides must be certified within 200 days from hire,¹ and the legislature extended this suspension through the end of the emergency declaration. Nevertheless, the pandemic still had substantial impacts on this profession.

The 2022 audit addressed testing barriers and recommended reducing the gap between training and testing by integrating tests into training programs, enabling online testing, and coordinating with Prometric (the current home care aide examination vendor) for immediate examination scheduling. It

¹ The extensions are in emergency rule, WSR 23-18-052 and the requirement waivers no longer apply as of 2/1/2024.

also urged for more in-person test sites to mitigate shortages. The recommendations were incorporated into E2SSB 5278.

Progress to Date

The department has taken many steps to address the requirements of E2SSB 5278 and all the department's work for this report is data informed. The following are key implementation milestones:

- The department worked with Prometric to create a new system for exam scheduling and payment that allows the department to: (1) authorize applicants to schedule exams before they have completed training, (2) moves the knowledge exam to an online platform, and (3) allows for remote testing. This new exam scheduling system began in February 2024. The online examination is anticipated to launch in the fall of 2024.
- The department increased the number of examination proctors by allowing home care aides, along with RNs, to proctor examinations. This cut the examination waitlist by nearly 94%.
- In consultation with DSHS and other relevant participants, the department is investigating integrating testing into training by allowing training programs to administer the skills and knowledge exams during or at the end of the training program. Training programs indicate a need for legislative funding to implement. The department is working with DSHS, and other partners to pilot integrated testing, which will give us a specific estimate for cost and set-up needs. Our final report will include details of what this entails.²
- In consultation with DSHS and other relevant participants, the department developed a plan to expand testing sites. Implementation will involve conducting a feasibility study through a pilot program to determine costs and transitioning testing into training programs.³
- The department expanded test sites in Clark and King counties, as well as determined the best locations for future expansions. Clark County previously had no exam sites. There are now three exam sites in Clark County. King County had three exam sites and one additional site has been added.
- The department analyzed examination data based on exam language and determined there is a lower pass rate for those that took exams in Tagalog, Somali, Amharic, Arabic, and Khmer. The department is working with the translation vendor to ensure the translations are accurate and up-to-date.
- The department is negotiating a new contract with Prometric to include additional performance and data collection criteria, as well as detailed vendor costs. The new contract will take effect on or before November 30, 2024.
- The department is finalizing the requirements needed to ensure applicants have “sufficient access” to test sites by moving forward with a pilot program with Brookdale Senior Living to allow trainers to proctor the exams. We are also encouraging training programs to work with Prometric to become test sites.
- The department used web mapping platforms and credentialing database records to determine the distances applicants need to travel to reach testing sites, as well as survey data to determine

² This is authorized and funded in E2SSB 5278.

³ Also authorized and funded in E2SSB 5278.

a test site's current and potential capacity.

- While the department's key recommendation is for testing to be incorporated into the home care aide training programs, the department is continuing to finalize a complete set of specific action items and processes to ensure improvements in home care aide training and testing.

For questions about this report, please contact Tracie Drake, Executive Director for Home Care Aide Program, at tracie.drake@doh.wa.gov or 360-480-7479.

Sincerely,

Shawna K. Fox, MA
Director, Office of Health Professions

cc: The Honorable Annette Cleveland, Senate Health & Long-Term Care Committee
The Honorable Marcus Riccelli, House Health Care and Wellness Committee
Amber Leaders, Governor's Policy Office
Megan Veith, Department of Health
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