

Clear and Present Danger: Too Much Work and Too Few People CSPD Across the Country Competing for Experienced Staff

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Across the country central sterile processing (CSP) leaders find themselves confronting unrelenting workloads with a growing number of vacancies and turnovers that seem to be increasing by the day. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and shifts in the worker's mindset converging to produce a labor shortage that has severely impacted how health care systems do business.

Passionate and talented people are not easy to come by. Several factors have aligned to create a worker's market leaving employers in all industries scrambling to devise new incentives, pitch salary hikes, and to create a culture that will inspire loyalty, against the labor market odds. Health care organizations are no stranger to staffing shortages but are now having to review not only their compensation packages, but how they train, recruit, and retain a stable workforce today and in the foreseeable future if they want to stay profitable.

It is clear health care organizations are reaping what they have sown. Central sterile leaders have been telling their administrators for years to invest in CSPD and its people. CS technicians are among the hardest working and lowest-paid hospital employees, with annual hourly wages stagnate. In some parts of the country a CS technician's pay is not much more than the minimum wage. And the work a CS technician does is fraught with many challenges. The work is complex and requires attention to detail for many hours in a day. The cleaning of certain devices, for example, can require hundreds of steps, taking many hours to complete. In addition, the work can be dangerous and involves exposure to toxic chemicals, some odorless, while

others pungent having an overpowering odor, impacting their ability to work comfortably. The pace of the work is relentless too. Many throughout the country are expected to reprocess tens of thousands of surgical instruments daily at busy acute care hospitals.

As a result, an increasing number of CSP technicians are leaving their hospitals for lucrative positions with travel agencies and hospitals have finally taken notice to how important CSPD is to their organization. At the time of this publication ZipRecruiter had nearly 500 travel sterile processing jobs posted, many offering hourly wages as high as \$90 an hour in some parts of the country. In addition to those high hourly rates some come with other incentives (bonuses, free housing, rental car and per diem to cover the cost of meals). Twenty-eight percent of travel jobs currently listed are paying above the 50th percentile, averaging \$57,399 a year.[1-2] Far more than what most CS technicians currently make in their full-time roles.

The costs associated with travelers is costing health care organizations a great deal more. Keep in mind that hospitals bear the costs of not just the traveler but pay the agencies that supply those individuals as well. The costs are not just in dollars paid but diluting the departments total years of work experience.

What to look for when hiring travelers to fill your vacancies ...

CSPD outsourcing is a big decision and can have long-term implication. Health care leaders should take time and explore the potential pros and cons of bringing on travelers. Outsourcing CS staff should be your last resort. If it is necessary here are a few things a reputable agency should be able to provide:

- Know their applicants and provide letters of reference,

- preferably from previous assignments
- Provide applicants who are certified, have several years of experience and validated competencies in all areas of sterilization and high-level disinfection (HLD)
- Have prescreened their applicants with recent background checks and drug screens
- Provide a declaration by a physician that validates an applicant is fit for duty and will not require accommodations, including annual physical examinations and up-to-date immunizations
- Have required certifications that will not require renewal while on contract such as, Basic Life Support (BLS)
- If an applicant is unable to fulfill their contractual obligations for any reason or is not the right fit for your organization, the agency should be able to provide a substitute within 24-72 hours

FIGHTING COVID BY KEEPING YOUR STAFF SAFE

The COVID wave has been a challenge. With many organizations experiencing five-day rolling quarantines, it seemed as soon as one employee returned to work another was out sick. Limited staff and COVID call outs can be tough. Here are a few simple ways to stay on top of the situation and help prevent, or at a minimum reduce, the chances of your team's exposure.

- Promote a culture of safety
- Measure the performance of safety protocols
- Vaccination and boosters are the number one defense against COVID, ensure COVID-19 vaccine requirements for health care providers (HCP) are followed. Where none are applicable, continue to encourage vaccination and booster dosing.
- Wash your hands properly and then wash them again
- Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) appropriately (masks, gowns, protective eye wear), If masks are abundant, change masks during your shift. Surgical masks if worn continuously should be changed every 4 hours or if they become wet or soiled
- Every two hours have your employees stop what they are doing and clean their workstations with an approved hospital disinfectant
- Clean all high touch surfaces
- Social distance as best you can and limit the number of staff in break areas

- If you live and work in a temperate area of the country encourage staff to get outside for some fresh air

WHAT'S AT RISK

- **Patient Safety:** CS technicians can have a direct and significant impact on safe quality care. Surgical site infections (SSI) rates for example, can be directly correlated to instrumentation that has not been reprocessed correctly. Staffing shortages and work demands may cause your staff to cut corners. Stay the course and follow all necessary steps.
- **Regulatory Citations:** Common citations related to CS include, but are not limited to, insufficient training in sterilization and HLD. Pushing buttons because that is what they were told to do and not understanding the science for every process result in recommended protocols being undermined by shortcuts. Ensure your staff and travelers are competent, provide the necessary oversight and validation. In the end, leadership matters.
- **Unwanted Local, National and Negative Social Media Attention:** Reputation management is critical in today's social media driven world. Numerous health care organizations have had negative press related to CSPDs inability to sterilize or perform HLD properly and the negative affects it had on their patients.

CONCLUSION

Today's health systems are facing severe staffing shortages and the perpetual and costly cycle of retention, recruitment and onboarding of new staff and travelers is taking its toll. The pandemic has only made staffing shortages more prevalent. With tenured staff retiring or leaving the industry and younger staff's move to traveler agencies for greater pay opportunities has led to severe shortages this nation has never seen. Health care leaders who do not understand the importance of CSPD or manage its operations properly will certainly leave their organizations open to financial risks. In the near term, travelers may be the answer to cover vacancies. Long term CSP working conditions and compensation must be addressed if CSPD are going to recruit and retain the finest talent. The time it takes to find, interview and onboard new employees and travelers alike costs more than dollars. One bad outcome can change the reputation of an entire organization. ■

REFERENCES

- [1] <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Jobs/Sterile-Processing-Travel>
[2] <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Jobs/Travel-Sterile-Processing>