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Hospitals and other health care facilities are trying to make sense of a pandemic-perpetrated topsy-turvy business-scape. It's one that emptied many medical institutions of top-drawer talent due to fear, burnout and, in some cases, the deaths of frontline caregivers who may not have been adequately prepared or protected from COVID-19.

The job market offers a mirror of the chaos. "Last March (2020), when COVID struck, health care hiring was at a complete standstill," says Preet Kuar, CEO of Sacramento-based Pacific Staffing. "The temporary employees for whom we helped secure jobs, were suddenly furloughed."

But in June and July 2020, "there was an equally sudden hiring rise," Kuar says. "People had left their jobs in health care not only because of burnout but also because they were simply terrified. Some essential workers started staying home or taking indefinite leaves of absence. Nurses were quitting because they were scared for their lives. Or they stopped working with patients in person and transferred to call-center jobs, especially in the (medical) insurance field, where they were helping people with their policies and payments."

For some medical systems in the Capital Region, the past year may have been full of chaos, but it has also meant expansion in terms of jobs. "We added approximately 40 new hires in January and February (of this year)," says Siri Nelson, CEO of Marshall Medical Center, which is based in Placerville and has about 1,800 employees spread throughout several El Dorado County clinics. "During the pandemic, we in-

creased new hires in the areas of respiratory therapy, staff and triage nursing, and screening staff."

Nelson says, "El Dorado County continues to grow, and our mission is to take care of our community. I would expect that, over the next few years, we would also continue to grow. We continue to add to and expand our services. With that, we will need health care providers and staff to support these needs."

Beginning to reboot

This may be a bad time for people to quit a job in the health care industry.

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As The George Washington University School of Business states on its website, "Not only does the world need more healthcare professionals, but the career itself can be rewarding to the individual. A career in healthcare may afford one the opportunity to have an impact on the health of an entire town, state, or nation."

Online job-search services show a pent-up demand for health care jobs erupting, especially for vaccinators and non-physicians. "We've seen an uptick, yes, but in my opinion and the opinion of my peers, most of the hiring

is due to the vaccine rollout," says Kim Dukes, the Sacramento region vice president and health care practice manager for Robert Half, an international employment agency. "People are needed to administer the shots, but permanent health care jobs aren't necessarily on the rise."

In fact, Dukes says, citing data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Education and health services (hiring) fell by 7,600 jobs since last March. Employment losses were reported in health care and social assistance, which are down by 5,000 jobs."

On the other hand — the one trying to get a firmer grasp on the elusive subject of whether the health care industry is booming or bottoming — in El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento and Yolo counties between February 2021 and March 2021, the combined employment in all industries totaled 979,000 jobs, an increase of 5,000. Nevertheless, "Industries reported month-over-month declines," Dukes says.

Dukes says the Robert Half agency's health care employment mainstay is placing people in nonclinical jobs: receptionists, accounting and finance clerks, and medical billing and collections. "Most of the region's bigger players, like Sutter Health, Dignity Health, Kaiser (Permanente) and UC Davis Medical Center, recruit for the C-suite jobs by other means," she says.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the five key health care jobs in high demand now and through 2029 include nurse practitioners, whose employment figures are expected to go up by 52 percent; occupational therapy assistants, a category looking at a likely 35 percent increase; and physical therapist assistants, with a 33 percent rise.