# Ebola Response Hits a Workforce Bottleneck

Congo has treatment centers under construction, but not enough trained, paid health workers to run them.

A temporary treatment room sits ready with beds and protective gear but no health workers present.

Congo is running short of health workers for Ebola **treatment** centers while the **outbreak** remains uncontrolled across a wide area. That means the problem is not only medical; it is also a **staffing** and operations problem. A bed that has no nurse, cleaner, clinician, or **infection**-control worker assigned to it is not really a working bed.

According to Associated Press reporting published by PBS NewsHour, the World Health Organization warned that Congo does not have enough health workers to staff treatment centers, especially in North Kivu, an eastern province where cases surged over a recent three-week period. The outbreak has spread to seven provinces. Government figures cited in the report list 7,773 confirmed cases and 3,759 deaths. In some places, cases are falling, including Ituri, which the report describes as the epicenter, meaning the area at the center of the outbreak. In others, the disease is still rising or difficult to contain.

For a health science or public-safety CTE pathway, the important part is the **workforce** chain. An Ebola treatment center is not just a building with beds. WHO representative Anne Ancia said one center needs about 300 health professionals, including anesthetists, hygienists, nurses, and general practitioners. An anesthetist is trained to provide anesthesia, the medicine and monitoring used to keep patients safe during certain procedures. A hygienist in this setting focuses on cleanliness and infection prevention, work that can include **sanitation**, safe handling of contaminated materials, and making sure care areas do not spread disease. A general practitioner is a physician trained to provide broad medical care rather than one narrow specialty.

The shortage is happening under difficult field conditions. The AP report says insecurity, displacement, a health workers' strike, and heavy population movement are all making the response harder. Displacement means people have been forced to leave where they live, which can interrupt normal clinic care and make it harder to track where patients have gone. Heavy movement also changes the work for health teams: instead of serving a stable patient list in one place, they may have to adjust staffing, supplies, and outreach as people move between communities.

The labor problem is also a management problem. Catherine Smallwood, the WHO's Ebola incident manager, said treatment beds are being added daily, but facilities still do not have enough staff and partner organizations to operate them. An incident manager is the person responsible for coordinating a response during an emergency, including people, supplies, information, and decisions. In a normal hiring market, adding **capacity** might mean posting

jobs and waiting. In an outbreak, the timeline is compressed, and the hiring need includes people who can work safely in a high-risk clinical environment.

Pay is part of the crisis. The report says frontline workers in Ituri previously went on strike over unpaid wages, which made access to care worse. Congo's health minister said the government was checking **payroll** lists after names of people not involved in the response had been added. Frontline workers said officials promised to pay back wages, but some received nothing and others only part of what they were owed. That detail matters because workforce systems depend on trust. If workers believe they may not be paid, fewer may accept dangerous assignments, and those already working may leave or stop work.

The patient mix adds another layer to the job. WHO officials said children under five have the highest case fatality rate, which means the share of confirmed patients who die from the disease. The rate for that age group is more than 60%, compared with about 40% among adults. Smallwood said it is harder to detect cases in very young children because they may not be able to describe symptoms clearly, and the symptoms can be confusing. That changes the work for clinicians and **triage** staff, who sort patients by urgency and likely condition. They need observation skills, communication with caregivers, and procedures that protect other patients and staff.

For anyone considering health care, emergency management, environmental services, or public health, this outbreak shows how many occupations are needed before care can happen. Nurses and doctors matter, but so do payroll staff, **logistics** coordinators, cleaners, data workers, supervisors, and partner organizations that keep centers operating. The hiring question is not only who has a credential. It is who can be verified, paid, scheduled, supervised, protected, and retained long enough for the system to function. In Congo's Ebola response, the limiting factor is not only disease. It is whether the workforce can be built fast enough to match the emergency.

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Written from reporting by PBS NewsHour.

## THINK IT THROUGH

1. If a treatment center can add beds faster than it can add trained staff, should leaders keep expanding physical capacity or slow construction until staffing is secured? Defend your position.

2. How should an emergency health response balance fast hiring with the need to verify payroll and prevent people who are not working from being paid?

3. What lessons from this Ebola staffing shortage could apply to a local disaster response in the United States, such as a flood, wildfire, or mass shelter operation?

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CAPACITY INFECTION LOGISTICS OUTBREAK PAYROLL
SANITATION STAFFING TREATMENT TRIAGE WORKFORCE

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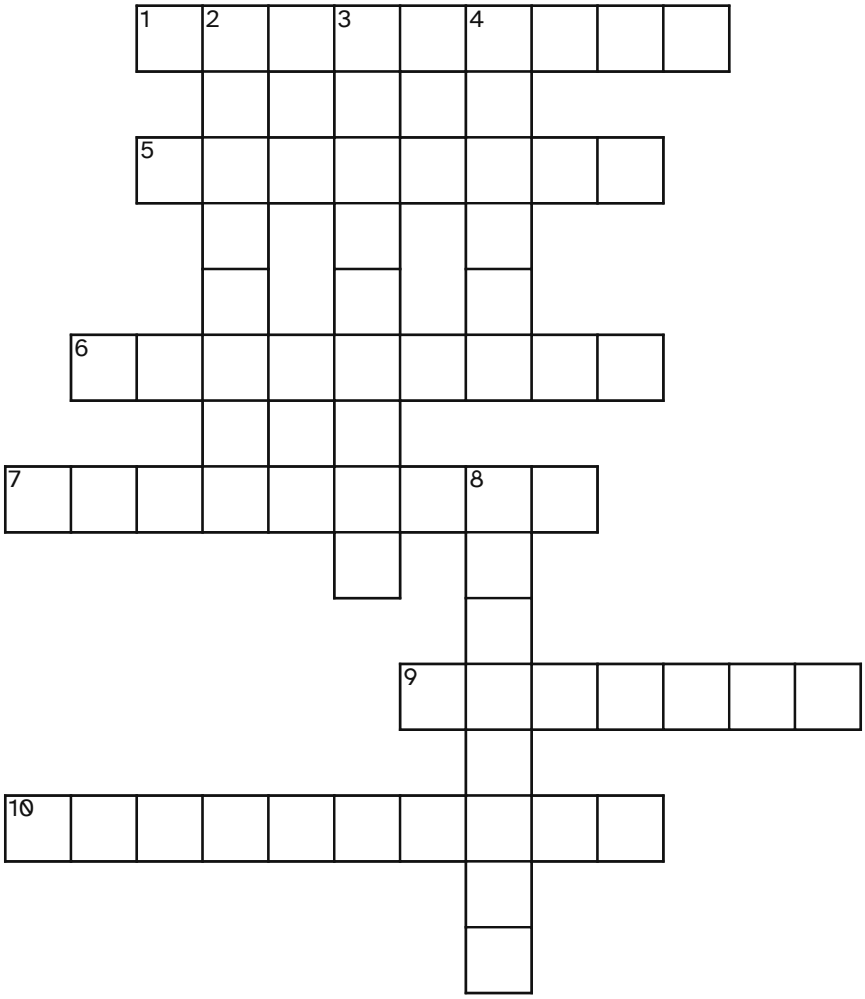

ACROSS

1 Coordinating supplies, people, and equipment for an operation

5 Supplying enough qualified workers for needed roles

6 Medical care that aids recovery or manages illness

7 People available to fill an organization's jobs

9 Employee pay record system

10 Cleanliness practices that reduce disease spread

DOWN

2 Sudden surge of disease cases in a community

3 Illness caused by harmful germs multiplying in the body

4 Sorting patients according to urgency of care

8 Greatest workload or patient volume a facility can handle

# Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

**PBS NewsHour**

"Congo faces health worker shortage as Ebola remains out of control, WHO says"

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| Published | Thursday, September 24, 2026 |
| Read by us on | Friday, September 25, 2026 |

https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/congo-faces-health-worker-shortage-as-ebola-remains-out-of-control-who-says

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The article and its discussion questions, a word search, and a crossword.

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