

Fact Sheet: Expand Behavioral Health Workforce

The latest budget enacted by the NCGA includes \$835 million towards NC’s mental and behavioral health services, including investments designed to recruit and retain a much-needed workforce.

- Reimbursement rates for several health care positions will increase for the first time since 2012, including skilled nursing facility workers, personal care service providers, direct care workers for people on a state- and federally funded Medicaid program that serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- There is a one-time funding of \$40 million over two years for sign-on and retention bonuses for employees of state mental health facilities.
- \$18 million over two years is designated to “establish a workforce training center that would provide no-cost training to public sector behavioral health providers, and to administer grants to community colleges to enhance behavioral health workforce training programs”
- \$50 million over two years is provided to expand the NC. Loan Repayment program, which is aimed at recruiting and retaining primary care and behavioral health providers to rural or underserved areas. The program currently offers awards up to \$50,000 in exchange for a 3-year service commitment.

Source:

Knopf, Taylor, *State officials tout ‘once in a lifetime’ investment in North Carolina’s mental health services* (October 2023) at <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2023/10/06/state-officials-tout-once-in-a-lifetime-investment-in-north-carolinas-mental-health-services/>

NC DHHS and the Department of Commerce issued recommendations for strengthening NC’s nursing, direct care, and behavioral health workforce in January 2024. The following is an excerpt taken directly from that document.

Behavioral Health | Context

Background

North Carolina is currently experiencing a behavioral health crisis marked by a surge in demand and a shortage of care professionals in the field. Two in five of North Carolinians live in a mental health professional shortage area. Beyond that, 22 counties have no practicing psychiatrists. Rural counties in North Carolina have 0.58 psychiatrists for every 10,000 residents, and 68 counties do not have a child and adolescent psychiatrist present.¹



Kaiser Family Foundation reports a national increase in depression, anxiety, and opioid use since the beginning of the pandemic.²

52%

Of the 14.2% of youth in North Carolina who were diagnosed with a major depressive episode in 2022, 52% did not receive mental health services.¹



The 2021 youth suicide rate among ages 10 to 17 is its highest in two decades.³

13%

North Carolina mental health providers only meet 13% of the mental health needs in the state compared to the national average of 28% demand that is met by providers.⁴

Considerable demand strains the already limited workforce

Challenges

North Carolina’s behavioral health workforce is experiencing numerous challenges, including low reimbursement rates, high administrative burden, lack of visibility surrounding career paths, and limited career advancement opportunities for unlicensed professionals.

Low reimbursement rates

In North Carolina, reimbursement rates have not been updated since 2013.⁵ Lower Medicaid payment rates (relative to other payers) as well as and mental health providers limit participation in Medicaid and further exacerbate existing workforce shortage. However, in late 2023, the state of North Carolina appropriated \$220M annually to increase behavioral health Medicaid rates, with the new rates in effect as of January 1, 2024.

Administrative burden

Administrative burdens can inhibit providers from accepting insurance. Often, the administrative burdens are higher for Medicaid than other payors.⁶

Barriers to entry & return on investment

Licensed behavioral health professional positions require a master's degree in counseling, psychology, social work, family therapy, or other human services related field. These degree programs often leave students with significant student loan debt.⁵

Limited opportunities for advancement in unlicensed positions

For the unlicensed behavioral health workforce, including qualified professionals, associate professionals, and paraprofessionals, career progression exist, but is not clearly articulated nor based on certification. Talented employees can feel stagnant without advancement options and leave for higher paying roles elsewhere.⁷ The current certification process for peer support specialists can be difficult to navigate in North Carolina. There are currently only four to six approved curriculums and few agencies hiring peer support specialists.⁷

The document highlights current efforts being taken to address the challenges, such as:

- **State Loan Repayment Program** which focuses on behavioral health providers who provide psychiatric care as well as integrated care to people in rural and underserved communities. The Office of Rural health receives federal funds to administer the program.
- **NCDHHS Addiction Education Minority Fellowship Program** provides tuition scholarships for students from ethnic/racial minority groups to pursue degrees that support work in the addiction, prevention, treatment, and recovery fields.

The Behavioral Health Working Group developed 5 recommendations to enhance the workforce:

1. Advance the data landscape for the behavioral health workforce
2. **Define the unlicensed behavioral health workforce and professional pathways**
3. Incent recruitment and retention for publicly funded mental health roles, including both licensed and unlicensed professionals
4. **Increase training and credentialing for peer support professionals**
5. Establish regular intervals for behavioral health rate adjustments

Source:

Caregiving Workforce Strategic Leadership Council, *Investing in North Carolina's Caregiving Workforce: Recommendations to strengthen North Carolina's nursing, direct care, and behavioral health workforce* (January 2024) at <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/investing-north-carolinas-caregiving-workforce-recommendations-strengthen-north-carolinas-nursing/download?attachment>

These recommendations are in line with a report issued in 2022 by the National Conference of State Legislatures on "State Strategies to Recruit and Retain the Behavioral Health Workforce."

To increase the supply of behavioral health professionals, they named several actions taken by other states, such as establishing career pathways through partnering with educational institutions and residency.

- Colorado developed career pathways for behavioral health – including counseling, therapy, social work, psychology, psychiatry and psychiatric nursing through the My Colorado Journey platform, expanding access to education and data to help students and job seekers find pathways to career and upskilling opportunities.
- Washington appropriated \$1.5 million in 2021 to establish apprenticeship programs, compensate providers and apprentices, develop on-the-job training and provide incentives for providers in communities serving rural communities and communities of color.

Source:

<https://www.ncsl.org/health/state-strategies-to-recruit-and-retain-the-behavioral-health-workforce#toc2>