

Bridging the Gap:

Challenges and Solutions for
A THRIVING
BEHAVIORAL
HEALTH
WORKFORCE

Executive Summary



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New York City is in the midst of a behavioral health crisis. In response, the City has put forward an ambitious public health blueprint to transform the approach to mental health and wellness for all New Yorkers. This has opened the doors for innovative thinking and collaborative responses.

The Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health (OCMH) plays a key role in driving systems-level change to improve mental health outcomes. OCMH works to identify and address critical gaps in mental healthcare by bringing together city agencies and additional stakeholders to work within and across systems to create change. This approach relies on cultivating a diverse, skilled, and well-supported behavioral health workforce to sustain a city where New Yorkers are safe, healthy, and able to access opportunities.

This paper reviews current research and insights into the driving forces for the behavioral health workforce shortage and also provides an overview of the multifaceted approach OCMH is taking to effectively respond to these crises, including a discussion of promising practices in NYC and beyond.

Challenges Facing the Behavioral Health Workforce: A Multi-Pronged Crisis



Labor Crisis

There is a significant shortage of behavioral health professionals in the public sector, which includes the institutions and providers who serve low-income and uninsured New Yorkers, such as government agencies, public hospitals and clinics, schools, non-profits, and faith-based organizations. The behavioral health workforce has greater than average growth projections as community needs persist; therefore, it is critical to establish and maintain a strong pipeline of professionals to meet current demands and to prepare for the future.



Mental Health Crisis for Practitioners

Burnout is prevalent in healthcare and non-profit sectors, exacerbated by secondary traumatic stress for many behavioral health professionals working with clients who have experienced trauma. Additionally, moral injury occurs when practitioners face ethical conflicts in their work and can be further compounded by factors including lack of cultural representation and microaggressions in the workplace. Addressing these issues is an essential component of cultivating a fully staffed, healthy, and effective workforce.



Crisis of Representation

There is a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the behavioral health workforce and a need for greater cultural competency among care providers. These challenges are rooted in historical injustices and persist today, as evidenced by significant inequities and disparities. The workforce also lacks diversity across disciplines, with an over-reliance on social workers while other professions crucial to a multidisciplinary approach remain underrepresented. A comprehensive behavioral health workforce includes professionals with a wide range of both clinical and non-clinical titles.



Investment Crisis

Adequate investment is essential for workforce expansion and sustainability through economic downturns. Incentivizing individuals to enter and remain in the behavioral health field requires both long term government investments and private sector partnerships, as well as innovative restructuring of systems to create cost-neutral solutions.

Responding to the Workforce Crisis: Proposed Solutions and Promising Practices



Career Pathways

Support for entry and advancement in the behavioral health career sector can occur at all life stages. Early exposure initiatives in schools and community programs can spark career interest and build foundational skills, while mid-career upskilling opportunities support professionals in entry-level positions as well as career changers. Finally, pathways for advanced credentialing ensure that those looking to deepen their expertise and leadership abilities can do so as well.



Talent Development

Investing in the existing workforce involves enacting organizational changes that allow professionals to work at the top of their licensure and take part in ongoing training. To enhance capacity and improve employee experiences, providers can leverage the skills of staff who represent a diversity of professional knowledge and specialization. Additionally, employee retention can be strengthened by expanding professional development and employee benefit initiatives.



Educational Access

Increasing access to behavioral health training and credentials is key to preparing a robust workforce. This includes expanding entry points into behavioral health education, pathways to and through college-connected, credit-bearing certification programs, and reducing barriers to graduate-level education and professional licensure.



Capacity Building

Expanding community-based care involves strengthening and supporting the organizations providing services, especially those that are BIPOC-led and located in underserved areas. This includes upskilling staff at community- and faith-based organizations, adapting evidence-based interventions for local contexts, and providing centralized training and learning opportunities.



Sustainable Solutions through Collaboration and Innovations

Addressing the behavioral health needs of New York City requires a collaborative approach involving city and state government, non-profit organizations, educational institutions, faith-based partners, private sector partners, and funders. Successful strategies should prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion and be informed by individuals with lived experience and impacted communities.

By pursuing the above outlined strategies and maintaining authentic stakeholder engagement, NYC is poised to address current workforce needs and set a national standard in behavioral health workforce development and innovation.



To learn more about behavioral health workforce initiatives at the NYC Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health, scan the QR code or visit the workforce section of the OCMH website: nyc.gov/mentalhealth