Addressing the Behavioral Health Workforce Crisis: Understanding the Drivers of Turnover & Strategies for Retention

Across the country, we frequently hear that Wraparound providers have difficulties with workforce retention, recruitment, and re-training. The important role of the care coordinators and supervisors is undeniable. Yet, the behavioral health workforce's longstanding issue with high turnover rates had led to far-reaching implications, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A systematic review found annual turnover rates in the behavioral health field to be three to six times higher than the optimal benchmark to maintain stability and expertise (that is, 30-60% versus 10%).[i] The behavioral health workforce shortages impact not only staff morale and organizational effectiveness but also the quality of care delivered to young people and families seeking vital mental and behavioral health services.[ii] In care settings, high turnover disrupts provider-family relationships, potentially hindering engagement and reducing adherence to treatment plans, thus impacting outcomes.[iii]

Given the projected surge in demand for behavioral health providers,[iv] it is critical to understand the factors influencing turnover and highlight effective retention strategies, so that we can best support staff and ensure that those seeking care have access to robust, high-quality behavioral health services in the coming years.

Drivers Contributing to Turnover

A myriad of studies have examined the drivers that contribute to the behavioral health workforce crisis. They have uncovered a complex, multifaceted, and interrelated set of factors that contribute to turnover.

Some key drivers include:
- **Low wages and benefits**: Compared to other healthcare professionals, behavioral health workers are often compensated less with lower salaries and fewer benefits, making it difficult to attract and retain talent.[v]
- **High workload and stress**: The demands of the work are concurrently challenged by limited resources, inadequate service array, administrative burdens, and the rising acuity of behavioral health concerns, which can lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion, resulting in staff attrition and losing skilled workers to other fields.[vi,vii,viii]
- **Lack of support and resources**: Insufficient training, inadequate supervision, minimal access to professional development, and limited opportunities for career advancement can result in staff feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, contributing to their departure.[ix,x]
- **Organizational culture**: A negative workplace environment can significantly impact staff satisfaction and retention, as well as limit optimal organizational functioning.[xi]
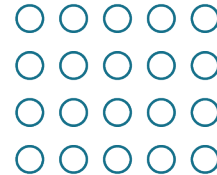
High turnover rates impact both staff and the quality of care provided, often leading to:

- **Disruptions to the continuity of care**: Frequent staff departures cause instability and disruptions to the continuity of care for individuals and families (that is, long waitlists, delays in treatment, clinical errors, suboptimal staff to individual/family ratios), thereby negatively impacting overall outcomes.[xii]
- **Reduction in staff morale**: High staff turnover can create a sense of frustration and discouragement among remaining staff, exacerbating the issue.[xiii]
- **Increases in workload**: Staff who remain often face increased workloads and demands, impacting staff wellbeing and potential quality of care issues.[xiv,xv]

Strategies for Retention

Given these longstanding issues with retention, a range of systematic recruitment and retention strategies have been identified to address workforce shortages and encourage staff retention. These strategies can be implemented at the system and organizational levels to strengthen and build a more sustainable behavioral health workforce to meet the needs of children, youth, and families seeking care.

Key recommendations for a behavioral health system include:

- **Investing in workforce development**: Increasing funding for training programs, scholarships, and loan forgiveness initiatives can attract and retain qualified, skilled workers.[xvi]
- **Leveraging paraprofessionals and peer support providers**: Expanding the workforce through the use of peer supports and peer-operated services can help address the acute need for behavioral health care.[xvii] Broadening the role and capacity of communities to effectively identify and address their needs can also enhance capacity, build trust, and improve collaboration.
- **Advancing policies at the federal and state levels:** Promoting policy changes, including policies aimed at increasing reimbursement rates, reimbursing for expanded provider types, and establishing recommended caseload sizes for specific programs, can support a more sustainable behavioral health system.[xix]
- **Investing in research and data collection:** Improved data allows for a better understand of the specific needs of the behavioral health workforce, leading to the development of tailored, effective interventions.[xx]
- **Enhancing partnerships:** Collaborative efforts between physical health and behavioral health care entities, community-based organizations, and educational institutions can strengthen the pipeline of behavioral health professionals.[xxi,xxii]

Key recommendations that could be implemented at the organizational level, with possible support from the behavioral health system, include:

- **Improving wages and benefits**: Offering competitive salaries, benefits packages, training stipends, and bonuses can incentivize staff to stay within the field.[xxiii,xxiv,xxv,xxvi]
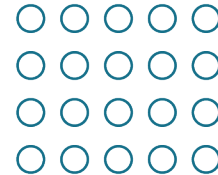
- **Promoting career advancement opportunities**: Establishing clear career ladders, creating mentorship programs, enhancing supervisory support, and providing opportunities for specialization can motivate staff to invest in their long-term growth within the field.[xxvii,xxviii,xxix]
- **Enhancing the work environment**: Implementing strategies to reduce stress and improve work-life balance, such as offering flexible scheduling, engaging staff in the planning and change process, and fostering a collaborative, supportive culture can improve staff well-being.[xxx,xxxi]
- **Investing in technology to improve service delivery**: Improving technology to streamline workflows, reduce administrative burdens, and create efficiencies, as well as expanding telehealth services to mitigate geographical barriers and limit provider strain can lead to increased staff satisfaction.[xxxii]

As the need for behavioral health services continues to grow, practical short- and long-term actions must be taken to mitigate the extent of the current workforce crisis. By acknowledging the drivers of turnover, implementing effective retention strategies, and investing in sustained solutions, we can build a stronger and more resilient workforce and help ensure that individuals and families have access to high-quality, timely, and appropriate behavioral health care, delivered by dedicated and well-supported professionals.

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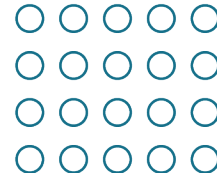
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