

Workforce Development

Address workforce shortages for Alaskan healthcare professionals

Alaskans working in healthcare and social services are the foundation of a continuum of care for Alaska Mental Health Trust (Trust) beneficiaries.¹

Healthcare professionals work for private and non-profit organizations, tribal, federal, local, and state entities, and contribute to a healthy workforce and strong Alaskan economy.

They provide “safety net” services that may include assisted living and personal care support, mental health and addiction treatment, case management, adult day and day habilitation programs, home-delivered and congregate meals, supported employment and job coaching, housing assistance, peer support and mentorship, and more.

Recruiting and retaining healthcare providers who serve Trust beneficiaries can be challenging. Work conditions are often stressful and physically challenging, and incentives to stay in-state or in the field are often limited. Lack of adequate pay, opportunities for full-time employment, benefits, mentorship and professional development are limited. Additionally, staff who leave their jobs under duress are less likely to return to the field, and with a generation of “baby boomer” workers retiring from the workforce, employers are losing seasoned professionals with knowledge and skills critically needed in healthcare in Alaska.

What is Alaska doing to build its healthcare workforce?

The Trust and partner advisory boards are working with both private and public agencies to address some of these challenges. Following

are some of the statewide efforts currently underway:

The Alaska Training Cooperative (AKTC), administered under UAA, supports career development and training for healthcare providers that blends evidence-based practices with traditional knowledge. AKTC serves professionals engaged with Trust beneficiaries by ensuring that technical assistance and training is accessible and coordinated.

The Alaska Native Health Tribal Consortium (ANTHC) collaborates with the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and the U.S. Department of Labor to promote apprenticeships through the *Behavioral Health Aide Registered Apprenticeship* program.

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFT) and Peer Support Specialists are now Medicaid-reimbursable occupations, expanding the pool of professionals who can serve beneficiaries.

The University of Alaska is expanding health programs, including social work and behavioral health programs, based on regional health workforce assessments that identify local healthcare workforce needs.

The action agenda of the *Alaska Health Workforce Coalition*³ contains systems change and capacity-building initiatives that address professional development, youth engagement, workforce policies, infrastructure, recruitment and retention, and evaluation and data.

The state’s SHARP loan repayment program offers incentives for medical and mental health care professionals to seek and maintain employment in Alaska.

Initiatives focused specifically on Direct Support Professionals (DSP) include a DSP career and apprenticeship pathway for graduating high school students and displaced workers; creation of the Alaska Alliance of DSPs and a peer network focused on a strengthened workforce; and participation in the *National Core Indicators* survey to collect workforce data that will inform efforts and measure progress.

In addition, a healthcare innovation hub, *Health TIE*, will identify and support implementation of emerging technology to increase the capacity of the service system.

Who Are Alaska's Healthcare Professionals?

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) and Personal Care Assistants (PCAs) provide long-term services that include assistance with daily living, systems navigation, non-clinical rehabilitation, transportation, and job coaching.

Case Managers assist in accessing services for personal care. **Care Coordinators** work across systems to coordinate an individual's healthcare plan, monitoring the delivery of services and fidelity of treatment and care.

Community Health Aides and Behavioral Health Aides offer primary, emergency, and behavioral healthcare in rural communities.

Behavioral Health Clinicians are licensed and non-licensed professionals who provide mental health and addiction treatment, assessments, recovery, and prevention.

Peer Support Specialists are people with lived experience of a disability or behavioral

health disorder who serve as mentors, recovery coaches, and system navigators.

Psychiatrists, Geriatricians, Neurologists are physicians skilled in assessing and managing the specialized medical needs of people with disabilities, including people with behavioral health disorders.

How can we build our workforce?

- Adequate livable wages for direct care providers to better recruit and retain staff who work directly with beneficiaries;
- Adequately-trained professionals to provide supervision, mentorship, and oversight, and improve the stability and safety of both staff and clients in urban and rural communities;
- Adequate transition support for Alaskans returning to the community after institutional care (psychiatric hospitals, juvenile detention, foster care, residential behavioral health, nursing homes, prison);
- Specialized services that assist justice-involved Trust beneficiaries during pretrial, incarceration, and reentry phases of their justice involvement;
- Incentives to address high turnover, burn-out, and early departure from healthcare employment;
- Enhanced apprenticeship opportunities for Alaskans with disabilities; and
- Further implementation of Alaska's *Employment First* efforts, including ramping up *State as a Model Employer (SAME)* within Alaska state departments.

The Trust and partner advisory boards support resources to recruit, engage, train, and retain healthcare professionals, and address Alaska's shortage of professionals serving Alaskans with disabilities, including behavioral health disorders, across the lifespan. ❖

¹ Alaska Mental Health Trust beneficiaries include Alaskans with mental illness, substance use disorders (SUD), Intellectual/Developmental Disorders (IDD) including fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), Alzheimer's disease and related dementia (ADRD), and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

² Healthcare professionals who serve Trust beneficiaries include direct support professionals, personal care attendants, case managers and care coordinators, community behavioral health clinicians and aides, peer support specialists, psychiatrists, geriatricians, neurologists, and more.

³ Alaska Health Workforce Coalition 2017-2021 Action Agenda.

For more information, go to: www.alaskamentalhealthtrust.org/jointadvocacy