

Workforce

Trust
Alaska Mental Health
Trust Authority

Alaskan Seniors
Living Longer Growing Stronger
from the Alaska Commission on Aging

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Alaska's behavioral health workforce is the foundation of a continuum of care that serves Alaskans with disabilities and behavioral health conditions. A robust workforce provides care in the least restrictive settings, keeping individuals out of expensive institutional care, and helps maintain stability and quality of life for Alaskans experiencing disabilities.

Who Are Alaska's Behavioral Health Professionals?

Behavioral health professionals work for both public and private organizations, Tribal, federal, local, and state entities in both urban and rural communities. These professionals contribute to a healthy workforce and strong Alaskan economy. The goal of a continuum of care is that all Alaskans have access to the right level of service, at the right place, at the right time.

- **Direct Support Professionals (DSPs)** and **Personal Care Assistants (PCAs)** provide long-term services that assist with daily living, systems navigation, non-clinical rehabilitation, etc.
- **Case Managers and Care Coordinators** assist with accessing services, treatment, housing, and employment support, etc.
- **Community Health Aides and Behavioral Health Aides** offer primary, emergency, and behavioral health care in rural communities.
- **Behavioral Health Clinicians** provide mental health and addiction treatment, assessments, crisis care, and prevention services.
- **Peer Support Specialists** are people with lived experience of a disability who provide mentorship and other support.
- **Psychiatrists, Geriatricians, Neurologists** are skilled in assessing and managing the specialized medical needs of people with behavioral health disorders and other disabilities.

Alaska's Workforce Challenges

There are workforce shortages throughout Alaska's health care sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing workforce challenges that impact Alaskans with disabilities and behavioral health conditions. Some Alaskans have gone without the services and supports that help ensure that their basic needs are met and that they have opportunities to lead meaningful lives and be engaged in their communities. Further, access to care and services in the community can help prevent individuals from needing more intensive levels of care, such as in a nursing facility or psychiatric hospital.

Recruiting and retaining behavioral health care providers can be challenging. Work conditions are often stressful and physically challenging, and some positions lack competitive pay, opportunities for full-time employment, benefits, and professional development opportunities. Staff who leave their jobs under duress are less likely to return to the field and, with a generation of workers retiring from the workforce, employers are losing professionals with the knowledge and skills critically needed in health care today in Alaska.

Key Points

- Without an adequate behavioral health workforce, the needs of vulnerable Alaskans cannot be fully met.
- To better retain and recruit staff who work directly with Alaskans experiencing disabilities, competitive, livable wages for direct care providers are needed.
- Adequately trained professionals are needed to provide not just services, but also mentorship, supervision, and oversight in the behavioral health workforce.
- Incentives are needed to address high turnover, burnout, and early departure of staff.
- Enhanced apprenticeship opportunities are needed in the behavioral health field, including opportunities for Alaskans with disabilities.

Building Alaska's Behavioral Health Workforce

The Trust and partner advisory boards support ongoing efforts to address Alaska's health care shortages and challenges. The following efforts are in place and need ongoing support:

Alaska Training Cooperative (AKTC) offers career development, training, and technical assistance for health care providers and professionals.

Alaska Native Health Tribal Consortium (ANTHC) manages the Behavioral Health Aide Registered Apprenticeship program.

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists (LMFT), Licensed Professional Counselors (LPC), and Peer Support Specialists have expanded the pool of professionals able to serve Alaskans with developmental disabilities and behavioral health conditions.

University of Alaska provides health programs designed to address local (urban and rural) health care and behavioral health workforce needs.

The Alaska Health Workforce Coalition addresses professional development, youth engagement, workforce policies, infrastructure, recruitment and retention, evaluation, and data.

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

Direct Support Professionals (DSP) continue to develop career and apprenticeship pathways for DSPs, including graduating high school students and displaced workers.

Health TIE supports emerging technology to increase the capacity of the healthcare service system.