

# Workforce

**Trust**  
Alaska Mental Health  
Trust Authority



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***Alaska's health and social services workforce is the foundation of care for Alaskans with disabilities and behavioral health conditions. A robust, qualified and fully staffed workforce helps keep Alaskans out of expensive institutional care and improves the health of Alaska's communities.***

## **Who Are Alaska's Behavioral Health and Home and Community-Based Services 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, 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, guidance, 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.

An adequate workforce not only helps ensure Alaskans have access to care, but also is necessary in meeting many health policy objectives.

## Alaska's Workforce Challenges

**There are workforce shortages throughout Alaska's health care and home and community-based services sectors.** 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 stable, 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.

## The Role of Medicaid

Medicaid plays a critical role in ensuring behavioral health treatment providers can serve low-to-no income Alaskans, thus increasing opportunities for treatment and recovery. Medicaid waivers for behavioral health, substance misuse and home and community-based services reduce the need for expensive institutional care and increases positive health outcomes for vulnerable Alaskans.

## Key Points

- The lack of adequate workforce results in vulnerable Alaskans having critical need unmet.
- 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 & Disability 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 are vital for the ongoing success of building the workforce.

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