

Behavioral Health Initiative (2018-2019) Overview

The Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) has determined that West Virginia has 94 Mental Health Professional Shortage Area designation sites within West Virginia. With this extreme level of need, it is not surprising that producing sufficient behavioral health providers is a significant workforce challenge for West Virginia. Behavioral health careers cover a range of career options, and many require advanced degrees and specialized training with additional continuing education throughout one's career. Job duties often involve providing services for children, adolescents and adults who may be dealing with behavioral and emotional challenges, mental illness, life stresses, trauma and substance use.

Through the leadership of the Department of Health and Human Resources, West Virginia has actively sought and received significant federal grant funding to support and improve the state's behavioral health infrastructure. Funding also has been secured from philanthropy and other private entities. Some of these awards have included support for behavioral health workforce development, however, West Virginia still lacks a consistent supply of funding focused solely on behavioral health workforce development, which impedes its ability to advance dedicated and continual resources towards the issues it faces.

In 1991, the Legislature enacted the Rural Health Initiative Act to provide funding towards the placement and retention of primary care providers in underserved areas of West Virginia. Due to the state's leadership in investing in primary care workforce development, West Virginia now offers many rural-focused training and educational experiences for trainees with expressed interest in careers in rural primary care. The funding is allocated to the Higher Education Policy Commission which uses both large and small grants to the academic health centers, primary care employers, and other related stakeholders to pilot new ideas, provide sustainable funding to strategies that are effective, and support key infrastructure like housing for students completing rotations in rural areas.

The model used for the Rural Health Initiative for primary care workforce development could translate well for behavioral health workforce development. The components below describe the key pieces that a sustained funding source for behavioral health workforce development could be allocated toward. This proposal focuses on careers in advanced practice social work, psychology, school psychology, and counseling. These professions were selected because they are among the most critical for West Virginia's behavioral health workforce success, but also the programs where the state lacks providers and funding to support workforce development is scarce.

The initiatives described below could be executed through a centralized state-funded program operating out of the Higher Education Policy, which would then administer some initiatives on a statewide basis and advance the rest through large and small grants to training programs, behavioral health employers, nonprofits, and other stakeholders. Alternatively, these initiatives could be supported through a mixed allocation with funding for statewide coordination at the Higher Education Policy Commission and direct appropriation increases to the budgets of public institutions of higher education.

Modeling from successful programs in other states and expanding on existing work in West Virginia, the Behavioral Health Workforce Initiative would have the following focus areas:

1. Promoting careers in behavioral health
2. High school pipeline programming
3. College pipeline programming
4. Enrichment activities and support for master's/doctoral-level trainees
5. Career development and skills enhancement for the existing workforce
6. Improving trainees' access to clinical supervisors
7. Incentivizing Careers in Behavioral Health
8. Attainment of specialized addiction credentials

For more information on the focus areas, the collaborative that established these priorities, and to see the full plan, please contact the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission Division of Health Sciences at (304)558-0530 or email Carolyn.canini@wvhepc.edu.