

Increasing the Mental Health Workforce Pipeline

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Interim Charge on the Health Workforce
Hogg Foundation for Mental Health
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The extent of the existing and projected mental health provider supply shortfall throughout Texas is well established, especially in underserved urban, rural and border communities. Efforts to increase the number and diversity of mental health professionals in the state will require multiple strategies and a long-term commitment among many partners at the state and local levels.

The focus of today's hearing is on how to successfully draw sufficient numbers of students into mental health professional training programs to meet the state's current and future needs. However, a realistic solution to the workforce shortfall must take advantage of all resources. For example, consumers and their family members and credentialed paraprofessionals can provide peer and treatment support services. In addition, access to existing providers could be more widely available through the use of telehealth technology. Finally, as medical research continues to uncover the link between physical and mental health, integrated treatment provided by medical and mental health providers in primary care settings should be expanded.

Strategies and Partnerships

In general, strategies to attract students to the mental health professions are similar to those for other health professions. However, mental health professions are generally less well known among young people and are often considered less attractive careers due to the lingering stigma of mental illness and low compensation, among other factors.

A recent evaluation of a Colorado Trust initiative intended to grow the supply of health professionals found the following three components were needed to impact the shortage¹:

1. Create awareness and interest in health careers among students at the middle school and high school levels.
2. Support and expand training opportunities.
3. Promote higher education - employer-community collaborations to recruit and retain professionals.

Examples of a successful initiative's components include:

- Incorporating mental health information into programs designed to expose young students to health careers through health fairs, career mentoring, job shadowing, special school clubs and high school health and human services academies.
- Better preparing young people transitioning from high school to college through academic tutoring, summer immersion programs and other support services (e.g., assistance with college entrance requirements).
- Reaching out to young people of color and bilingual students to foster their interest in mental health careers.
- Providing mentoring, tutoring and other types of academic assistance to support college students interested in mental health fields, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Providing financial incentives through scholarships, loan forgiveness, and internship stipends.

- Expanding academic training capacity in higher education for critical professions such as psychiatry, psychology, psychiatric nursing and social work.
- Providing training in primary care-based, integrated care models to medical and mental health students and professionals.
- Using distance learning strategies and technology to increase access to training and educational programs.
- Recruiting non-traditional students (e.g., mid-career and retiree professionals from other fields; working parents) and enabling their participation (e.g., weekend Master degree programs).
- Utilizing higher education – employer partnerships to create paid on-the-job training for students and a path into a job and career ladder.
- Encouraging local business and other community organizations such as local government and chambers of commerce to develop initiatives to “grow their own” by providing scholarships and other tuition assistance to students and employees who wish to advance their skills.

Examples of promising practices in other states

- Alaska has developed a multi-faceted plan that includes statewide public service announcements about mental health and the value of related professions, pipeline initiatives targeted at school-aged youth, distance learning degree programs through the University of Alaska from paraprofessional certificates through a doctoral program, financial support for students and jobs-to-career initiatives. This initiative, the most comprehensive in the country, is a partnership of the state department of health and human services, the University of Alaska, and a state mental health trust.
- Special high school academies through the Los Angeles Unified School District that incorporated mental health curricula and activities into their programs have successfully attracted racial and ethnic minority students into the field and dramatically improved the number of students who went on to postsecondary education.ⁱⁱ
- States that have critical supply problems in rural areas, such as Nevada, South Dakota and Hawaii, are developing initiatives to curry interest in mental health careers among youth and use technology and distance learning educational approaches to train and keep them in their home communities.

Promising practices in Texas

- CEOs of major public and private behavioral health providers in Houston have joined forces to develop a project designed to expose students at the high school level to the mental health professions, change how students are trained in higher education, provide internships, mentoring and similar hands-on training opportunities, and investigate effective incentives to attract and keep people in the field. This collaboration is in its early stages.
- The Hogg Foundation has recently announced a \$1 million, multi-year initiative to increase the number of Spanish-speaking social workers entering accredited graduate social work programs in Texas. The new statewide program is the first of its kind in Texas and possibly in the U.S. Schools must use scholarship funds to cover full tuition and fees for recipients. Scholarship recipients must be fluent in Spanish and commit to work in Texas after graduation providing mental health services for a period equal to the timeframe of the scholarships. The foundation worked closely with the University Of Houston Graduate College Of Social Work, which

developed a similar program four years ago. The University of Houston program has been highly successful in increasing the cultural and language diversity of its students and in attracting students to the field. In 2008, the college received 83 applications for five scholarships.

- Primary care clinics in several Texas communities, including El Paso, San Antonio, Houston, Austin and South Texas, are treating persons with mild to moderate mental illnesses through integrated physical-mental healthcare practices in primary care settings. Medical and mental health staff has been trained in integrated practices. Treatment is funded through a variety of state, federal and local sources, including the Hogg Foundation. However, traditional payer practices inhibit a broader implementation of the approach.

Potential legislative options to increase state capacity of mental health professionals in Texas



Ensure that legislative financial incentives to support student training for the health professions (e.g., loan repayment programs) include mental health professions as well.



Provide funding for public schools, Area Health Education Councils (AHECs), and mental health-related academic departments of colleges and universities to partner to attract and support young people who are interested in mental health careers.



Increase academic training program capacity for mental health professions, as has been done for nursing.



Make the best use of the existing provider base by reimbursing telehealth services provided by all licensed mental health professional types, not just physicians, Advanced Nurse Practitioners, and physician assistants.



Permit reimbursement of evidence-based integrated healthcare practices such as psychiatric consultation to primary care physicians to broaden access to mental health treatment through the existing workforce.



Examine the impact of reimbursement rates and funding for publicly-funded services (e.g., Medicaid, CHIP and the DSHS public mental health system) on the ability to attract and retain mental health providers.



Develop, through the Texas Health Care Policy Council, the Statewide Health Coordinating Council or another body convened for this purpose, a comprehensive, long-range state strategic plan to address the mental health workforce shortage.

ⁱ *Building Colorado's Health Professions Workforce* (Community Connection, Volume VII, Spring 2008). The Colorado Trust.

ⁱⁱ *A Strategic Plan to Increase the Flow of Minority, Bilingual and Culturally Competent Professional Social Workers into California's Mental Health System* (September 2007). Center for Social Services Research, University of California, Berkeley.