



Health Workforce Policy Brief

September 2016

Behavioral Health Workforce Challenges: Recruitment, Retention, and Work Environment

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BACKGROUND

The behavioral health workforce faces considerable challenges, including demand for behavioral health services, changes to the health system under the Affordable Care Act, the return of war veterans with behavioral health needs, and a shift from incarceration to treatment-oriented behavioral health care in the criminal justice system.¹ These changes place additional strain on the existing workforce and exacerbate behavioral health workforce recruitment and retention challenges such as high turnover, high workload, lack of resources, and stigma.

In addition, there are important questions about the diversity of the current behavioral health workforce. Demand for behavioral health services is discordant from the racial/ethnic composition of the behavioral health workforce. Adults who identify as two or more races are most likely to report mental health services, followed by whites, American Indians or Alaska Natives, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians.² This contrasts the current composition of this behavioral health workforce, in which non-Hispanic Whites account for the majority of all psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, counsellors, marriage and family therapists, and psychiatric nurses.³

The purpose of this study is to assess work environment factors that may impact recruitment, retention, job satisfaction, and diversity of the behavioral health workforce.

METHODS

The Behavioral Health Workforce Research Center (BHWRC) issued an online survey in July-August 2016 to collect information on worker demographics, educational background, occupational role, and factors that could impact recruitment, retention, promotion and diversity of the behavioral health workforce, such as advancement opportunities; diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace; and job satisfaction/employer support.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Findings of this study highlight a key factors that may impact workforce recruitment and retention opportunities:

- More information is needed to guide career advancement, as some perceive limited opportunity to advance despite feeling qualified for leadership positions.
- Leadership training is an area of high need.
- Although most reported working in an organization that values diversity, equity, and inclusion, discrimination was reported by some, suggesting structural barriers to advancement may exist.

Overall, respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with their employer and job. Study results include feedback from all survey respondents. Further analyses will identify work environment factors specifically impacting underrepresented minority workers.

¹Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (n.d). "Building a Recruitment and Retention Plan."

<http://toolkit.ahpnet.com/Building-a-Recruitment-and-Retention-Plan/Introduction.aspx>

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2015). Racial/Ethnic Differences in Mental Health Service Use among Adults. edited by Department of Health and Human Services. Rockville, MD.

³ Hoge, MA, JA Morris, AS Daniels, GW Stuart, LY Huey, and N Adams. (2007). "An action plan for behavioral health workforce development." Cincinnati, OH: Annapolis Coalition on the Behavioral Health Workforce.

The survey was disseminated by the Michigan Association of Community Mental Health Boards to its 128 member organizations. These organizations represent a diverse set of stakeholders, including private and public mental health provider organizations and housing assistance organizations. Organizations were asked to disseminate the survey by email to all employees who met the study’s eligibility criteria of directly providing services for prevention or treatment of mental health or substance use disorders. A \$100 gift card raffle was used as a response incentive. We did not collect identifying information from respondents due to the sensitive nature of some of the survey questions; therefore, a study limitation is the inability to accurately estimate the total number of participating organizations and potential survey respondents.

KEY FINDINGS

In total, 511 workers responded to the survey, 386 (76%) of which met the eligibility criteria of providing direct behavioral health or primary care. Respondents’ behavioral health occupations included: clinical social worker (28%), counselor (11%), case manager (9%), behavioral health specialist (3%), and “other” (23%).

Demographic data from respondents show: 84% were female, 66% identified as White/Caucasian, 30% as Black/African American, 2% as American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 2% as Asian; 3% were Hispanic. Approximately 92% of respondents identified as heterosexual or straight; 6% as LGBTQ. Seventeen percent spoke a language in addition to English. Educational background included master’s degrees (60%), bachelor’s degrees (23%), high school diplomas (8%), associate’s degrees (7%), and doctoral degrees (2%).

Respondents rated their level of agreement with statements related to advancement opportunities; diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace; and job satisfaction and employer support (Table 1).

Table 1. Level of Agreement with Work Environment Statements

Statement	n	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>Advancement Opportunities</i>						
I feel comfortable discussing promotion opportunities with my supervisor	129	12%	16%	23%	37%	12%
I do not receive sufficient training or support to grow into a leadership role	130	19%	15%	24%	33%	9%
I have limited opportunity for career advancement at my organization	129	11%	16%	16%	23%	33%
I currently possess the credentials to serve in a leadership role	130	6%	11%	8%	38%	38%
<i>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace</i>						
Issues of discrimination are discussed at work	307	11%	24%	22%	32%	11%
Race influences relationships with colleagues	312	16%	28%	22%	22%	11%
I am comfortable communicating about race/ethnicity at work	316	2%	10%	15%	43%	30%
My organization values a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion	319	4%	7%	14%	38%	38%
<i>Job Satisfaction and Employer Support</i>						
My work is valued by my employer	307	7%	7%	14%	36%	36%
I have the opportunity to give input on decisions affecting my work	306	7%	14%	14%	47%	18%
My supervisor gives me feedback that helps me improve my performance	306	4%	17%	17%	39%	23%
My department or agency is a good place to work	306	3%	8%	25%	39%	27%