Addressing San Diego’s Behavioral Health Worker Shortage

A needs assessment and vision to attract and retain essential behavioral health professionals
HOW MANY MORE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS DOES SAN DIEGO NEED?

18,500 more workers needed by 2027

17,000 behavioral health professionals in the current workforce

8,100 more workers needed to meet today’s demand

7,800 to replace those leaving in next 5 years

2,600 to meet growth in demand by 2027

WHY DO BEHAVIORAL HEALTH WORKERS LEAVE JOBS?

44% likely to search for a job in the next 12 months, vs 18-37% nationally

45% turnover for San Diego behavioral health workers, vs. 42% in the rest of California.
### What Are Workers Saying?

I have had to take out personal loans to cover my groceries. Rent is a whole paycheck. I’ve thought about going to grad school, but is it worth it to go thousands in debt for two more dollars an hour? I want to do this for the rest of my life, I love it. It makes me sad, but I don’t think I will be able to.

– SUD Counselor, Female

I just want to help people. But being extremely short-staffed—feeling the pressure, it’s brutal. I’m really burned out and I’m white knuckling it. Being hyper-vigilant in that way is not conducive to being a good clinician. It’s pretty maddening to be honest. I’m disillusioned.

– Pre-Licensed Counselor, Female

### What Can Be Done to Address This Shortage?

**Invest in Competitive Compensation**
San Diego BH professionals are paid less than other CA counties. **55% of workers surveyed were dissatisfied with pay.**

**Pursue Administrative Relief**
Streamlining documentation is a top concern for BH professionals. Explore **12 issue areas and 29 opportunities** to reduce administrative requirements.

**Build Regional Workforce Training Fund**
This report provides a financial framework for a **$128M down payment** to train **4,250** more professionals.

**Establish Regional Training Centers of Excellence**
Sites would **deliver services, expand training and supervision opportunities**, and provide **research opportunities** focused on integrated care, workforce optimization, and training best practices.

**Continue Listening to Workers**
Input from **1,600 San Diego workers and students** informed this report. Levels of job satisfaction, burnout, intent to leave, and other factors driving career decisions should be surveyed annually to inform implementation and measure progress.

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**Invest $128M in a Regional Training Fund**

- **$98M** for scholarships, stipends, loan forgiveness and expanding programs.
- **$30M** first-in-the-nation renewable training fund providing 0% interest loans to students and financing to establish training and supervision programs.

**Sample projects for $128M Fund**

- **$6M** to recruit, place, certify and provide on-the-job-training for **600 certified peer support specialists**.
- **$3M** for a regional apprenticeship program to train **600 community health workers**.
- **$8.5M** in scholarships and 0% interest loans to recruit, train, place and certify **1,150 substance use disorder counselors**.
- **$1.3M** to establish a **psychiatric technician** program with regional community colleges.
- **$7.8M** for stipends for **260 master of social work students** to complete paid internships in BH settings.
- **$7M** to create **280 new supervision slots** for associate social workers to accrue the 3,000 hours for LCSW licensure.
- **$64M** to train **84 psychiatrists** and **200 psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners** to work in integrated teams in community settings.
- **Loan forgiveness and down-payment assistance** in exchange for public service for diverse professionals to build wealth, live and work in San Diego long term.
Message from Nathan Fletcher

As Chair of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, my single highest policy priority since taking office in 2019 has been behavioral health—the intersection of mental health and addiction treatment. Since then, the County of San Diego has made unprecedented investments in behavioral health services. As part of my 2021 State of the County Address, I called on our County government to work with entities across San Diego County to develop a strategy to tackle the shortage of trained behavioral health workers in our region. The full report provides a deeper understanding of the worker shortage and existing talent attraction and retention challenges. It also brings new solutions to expand the number and diversity of mental health and addiction treatment professionals in San Diego.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this important project. With this roadmap, it is imperative we act with urgency to recruit, train and retain more mental health and addiction treatment professionals to work in San Diego County. Let’s get to work!

Nathan Fletcher, Chair, San Diego County Board of Supervisors

Thank you

To the 1,600 San Diego Behavioral Health workers and students who shared their experiences despite being busier than ever. No workforce strategy is complete without hearing directly from workers.


To the members of the San Diego Behavioral Health Workforce steering committee that generously volunteered hundreds of collective hours to help guide our understanding of the Behavioral Health system.

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Thank you for asking about all this. These are conversations we need to be having more of.

– Peer Support Specialist, Male