



# 7 Steps to Expand the Behavioral Health Capabilities of Your Workforce: A Guide to Help Move You Forward



American Hospital  
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*Advancing Health in America*



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## Introduction

In spring 2016, the AHA published a white paper, “**The State of the Behavioral Health Workforce: A Literature Review.**” The conclusion included seven steps that describe how a hospital or health system can strengthen its behavioral health workforce.

This guide builds on those concepts to include how to expand the capabilities of your workforce around addressing behavioral health needs. It offers new perspectives as well as tips and suggestions that can help you move your organization forward more rapidly, efficiently and effectively.

**Step 1:** Assess your current workforce knowledge and skills as well as your patient population.

**Step 2:** Ensure your workforce is knowledgeable about the socioeconomic determinants of health and the challenges facing your community, and make sure they are culturally competent.

**Step 3:** Educate your entire workforce to identify the signs and symptoms of behavioral health disorders and know where and how to refer for screening.

**Step 4:** Set up a procedure of assessment, treatment and referral so that behavioral health care is happening at the site of visit, if possible.

**Step 5:** Use interprofessional education and training and team-based care for your current and future workforce to begin integrating primary and behavioral health care.

**Step 6:** Contact higher education programs in your area to establish partnerships that address the needs of the population your hospital or health system serves, as well as enhance the recruitment and retention of behavioral health professionals.

**Step 7:** In order to strengthen care transitions and integration, engage the broader community, including:

- Community groups
- Community health centers
- Mental health care and substance abuse treatment providers
- Social service agencies
- Local law enforcement
- Judicial systems
- Schools
- Churches and religious organizations

## Step 1

Assess your current workforce knowledge and skills as well as your patient population.

**Challenge:** There are many different workforce assessments available. *How do you choose the best one?*

**Solution:** Look to hospitals that have conducted similar assessments and replicate their methods.

### Implementation Ideas:

1. **Refer to these assessment tools developed by the AHA to begin this process:** “[ACHI Community Health Assessment Toolkit](#)” and “[Developing an Effective Health Care Workforce Planning Model](#).”
2. **Choose organizations that are similar to yours in size and demographics.** In most cases, it is not necessary to build an assessment from scratch. Locate and ask peer hospital groups what assessment tools have worked well for them and if you can review their assessment resources. Your state or metropolitan hospital association may be able to help you identify similar organizations.
3. **Draw from your existing data.** As much as possible, repurpose existing patient and workforce data to populate your assessment.

## Step 2

Ensure your workforce is knowledgeable about the socioeconomic determinants of health and the challenges facing your community, and make sure they are culturally competent.

**Challenge:** Chances are your workforce has undergone some general training on these topics. However, they likely have had little training to help them understand how these factors impact behavioral health and their roles. *Where should you begin?*

**Solution:** Educate your workforce on the results of your community health needs assessment and other assessments to provide a broad, yet timely, snapshot of your community’s challenges. Contact behavioral health providers in your area from diverse backgrounds or who work with diverse ethnic and economic populations. Ask them to share their perspectives so your workforce has the most recent information and can build new skills and understandings.

### Implementation Ideas:

1. **Assemble an interprofessional panel or advisory group.** Invite these providers to participate in a panel discussion (either in-person or virtual) on current issues related to cultural and socioeconomic factors as they impact behavioral health. Invite your workforce and include a Q-and-A session at the end. Challenge your workforce to provide examples of how they can adapt their actions/processes to better address the cultural and socioeconomic needs of the patients they serve. Consider making this a quarterly or annual event, and provide feedback to the workforce on improvement or best practices.
2. **Include issues related to seniors as part of your discussion.** Seniors – whether they are from a majority or minority population, or whether they are economically challenged or well off – face unique challenges related to behavioral health. With the senior population of the U.S. growing rapidly, it is critical that your workforce have a clear understanding of seniors and their unique behavioral health issues. Working with the local Alzheimer’s association or a local aging council could enhance your work and expand your organization’s access to resources in this area.
3. **Consider a Community Medicine Rotation.** Through this experience, residents learn about and experience social service resources, which will allow them to better assist patients with complex behavioral health issues. They also can become culturally competent, compassionate providers. To learn more about a successful community medicine rotation program, go to Florida International University’s [Green Family Foundation Neighborhood HELP](#) program.

4. **Engage a patient advisory group from the community you serve.** Invite this group to provide feedback and insights on how your organization can be more respectful of, and supportive of, the needs of the diverse members of your community. Consider incorporating their feedback into the strategic planning process and/or the onboarding/training of your workforce.

## Step 3

Educate your entire workforce to identify the signs and symptoms of behavioral health disorders and know where and how to refer for screening.

**Challenge:** Your workforce is large and time and resources to conduct training are limited. *How can you accomplish this?*

**Solution:** Provide “on-demand” training so employees can access it when they have time.

### Implementation Ideas:

1. **Keep the training as generic as possible.** Ensure no patient data or sensitive information is included in the training – this way staff can access training off-site or from their homes, in addition to at work.
2. **Be sure to offer a platform where your workforce can ask questions.** Consider hosting and recording a webinar, publishing a simple blog or FAQs, or provide a contact person and an email address for employees to send workforce-related questions to regarding behavioral health. Appointing a go-to staff person or content expert liaison on behavioral health care would be beneficial to talk through any complex issues. Engage your employee assistance program in this platform.
3. **Consider using the following assessments and screening tools as a guide:**
  - **Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) Training (to improve clinical skills in substance use screening and referral)**
  - **The Trauma Informed Care Project**
  - **Primary Care PTSD Screen (PC-PTSD)**
  - **Cut Down, Annoyed, Guilty Eye Opener (CAGE) Questionnaire (for Alcohol)**
  - **Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) (for Depression)**
  - **Hurt-Insult-Threaten-Scream (HITS) (for Domestic Violence)**
  - **UNCOPE (for Substance Use)**
  - **Columbia- Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS)**

## Step 4

Set up a procedure of assessment, treatment and referral so that behavioral health care is happening at the site of visit, if possible.

**Challenge:** Providers are already challenged to deliver quality care in a limited timeframe. *How will they have time to add in behavioral health assessments as well?*

**Solution:** Work to integrate physical and behavioral health services at the provider level by embedding behavioral health clinicians (real or virtual) who work with the physical health providers to treat the patient. Develop knowledge of the full continuum of services and providers that are available in your community to improve the timeliness of referral (if needed) and treatment.

### Implementation Ideas:

1. **Consider both the patient assessment and delivery process.** Understand how behavioral health care is currently being delivered in your organization as well as how care will be delivered in your community in the future. After you have chosen which assessment to use, determine how it will best integrate into your already-established

processes. Use the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Integrating Primary Care and Behavioral Health Care assessments and Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's Academy for Integrating Behavioral Health and Primary Care's Integration Playbook](#) as starting points.

2. **Consider carefully what will happen when the patient leaves your location.** The process is complete and valuable only when all the steps are clearly outlined. That means not only identifying that a patient requires assistance, but specifically how that patient will navigate from this point of care to the services he or she needs. Consider creating your own patient navigator roles to fill this gap if a patient's support system outside the hospital is limited or non-existent.
3. **Convene or participate in conferences that disseminate information on this method of care delivery.** Promotion and buy-in for transforming behavioral health delivery must begin with senior leaders. Demonstrating that this is a priority for your organization will give your initiative more credibility – both internally and externally. Consider starting an [anti-stigma campaign](#) in your own organization, and be aware that the social stigma of seeking and receiving behavioral health care can differ based on the racial, socioeconomic and religious make-up of your community. In addition, building behavioral health screenings into your diabetes/cardiac community screening programs ensures reaching additional community members and provides an opportunity to erase stigma.

## Step 5

Use interprofessional education and training and team-based care for your current and future workforce to begin integrating primary and behavioral health care.

**Challenge:** Provider and organizational capacity for the change in care delivery, training and support is limited.

**Solution:** Convene a group of providers from the community to discuss and strategize successes, challenges and innovative ideas on how to provide high-quality, efficient care in an interprofessional setting.

### Implementation Ideas:

1. **Consider implementing [TeamSTEPPS](#) or a similar training program for interprofessional, team-based care across the organization, particularly between primary and behavioral health providers.**
2. **Based on a community health needs assessment, and, if necessary, a survey of providers and clinicians, benchmark how behavioral health care is being delivered and will be delivered in the future.** This also is a chance to uncover perceived barriers to integration, opportunities to enhance team-based care and organizational strengths that can be built on to implement an efficient, interprofessional setting.
3. **Strengthen the knowledge of local providers with evidence-based behavioral health practices.** The [IMPACT model](#) for depression care from the University of Washington, Seattle, Wash., is a great evidence-based tool to implement collaborative, diverse care for a variety of behavioral health conditions.

## Step 6

Contact higher education programs in your area to establish partnerships that address the needs of the population your hospital or health system serves, as well as enhance the recruitment and retention of behavioral health professionals.

**Challenge:** Looming retirements of the aging health care workforce threatens to increase professional shortage areas. Simultaneously, a multigenerational workforce provides a challenging landscape to develop the workforce that best meets your community's needs. Your organization should work to develop programs that help foster a cohesive, multigenerational workforce, and attract millennials, the demographic most likely to fill roles in your organization in the future. How can you attract and retain them?

**Solution:** Learn some important facts about millennials, their desires and their mindsets before developing new

partnerships or programs. Review these recent statistics:

- Millennials listed “a high-paying job” as the least important characteristic for a job  
Source: Pew Research Center
- 72% of current millennial students said they want a job with a greater purpose
- 71% of millennials wanted to consider their co-workers as their “second family”  
Source: Forbes, “Why Millennials Are Ending The 9 To 5,” August 13, 2013.
- 75% of millennials said that work-life balance was the key thing they looked for when planning their careers  
Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, The Millennial Generation Research Review, 2012

Training the incumbent workforce on identifying and treating patients with behavioral health conditions is equally important. Cross training and utilizing an interprofessional behavioral health treatment team can help create the best workforce to meet the needs of patients and the community.

### Implementation Ideas:

1. **Recognize that for many millennials a “job with a greater purpose” will lead them to health care.** Capitalize on this by developing resources that specifically discuss behavioral health careers, the workforce needs in this area and how their contribution can make a difference.
2. **Take advantage of the knowledge higher education staff have to offer, and learn from their past successes with millennials.** Meet with higher education representatives to learn what programs have worked well for them and discuss ways to incorporate similar tactics into your offerings.
3. **Examine your local higher education and training infrastructure.** Addressing barriers, such as a lack of clinical sites, faculty shortages or inadequate community resources, by promoting partnerships with higher education institutions may be helpful in promoting educational transformation that improves delivery of behavioral health care in the community.
4. **Increase recruitment of those with local backgrounds and community connections.** Engage medical schools, residency programs and other behavioral health professions programs in your area regarding selection of local students and residents who might be more likely to remain in the area as behavioral health providers.
5. **Work with your human resources department to enhance recruitment packages to appeal to millennials or those who are pursuing behavioral health care as a second career.** Consider implementing loan forgiveness and/or reimbursement programs for master’s level education/additional certification if these credentials are job-related. Implement flexible work hours whenever possible and offer telecommuting options when you can, as millennials highly value them.
6. **Provide timely updates and training on new technology to foster a culture of innovation.** Consider offering educational sessions where all ages are represented and learn to work with and from each other.

## Step 7

In order to strengthen care transitions and integration, engage the broader community, including:

- Community groups
- Community health centers
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- Local law enforcement
- Judicial systems
- Schools

- Churches and religious organizations

**Challenge:** These outside groups have limited time and resources, and can be hard to engage. How can you gain their attention?

**Solution:** Become a convener and invite community stakeholders to your institution to share goals and to establish collaborative relationships.

### Implementation Ideas:

1. **Make your purpose clear.** Before you connect with outside groups, consider giving your outreach initiative a mission and a name. Ensure your messages focus on what you both can gain through collaboration – and make sure all understand that this is an equal opportunity initiative, no one organization can do it by themselves.
2. **Don't just conclude your meetings or collaborations: Be sure you come away with data you can use.** One suggestion is to create informal surveys for community groups that can allow you to generate quality data quickly. Build time into your webinars or meetings for attendees to take these surveys before they leave the session.

For additional resources and information, go to: [www.aha.org/workforce](http://www.aha.org/workforce) and [www.aha.org/behavioralhealth](http://www.aha.org/behavioralhealth).

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Chicago Office  
155 N. Wacker Dr.  
Chicago, IL 60606  
312.422.3000

Washington, D.C. Office  
800 10th Street, NW  
Two CityCenter, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20001  
202.638.1100

[www.aha.org](http://www.aha.org)

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