



Sacramento County Mental Health Board

May 3, 2023

Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
700 H Street, Suite 2450
Sacramento, CA 95814

To: Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
Re: Recommendations to Address Behavioral Health Workforce Crisis

Honorable Supervisors:

The Sacramento County Mental Health Board's (MHB) statutory duties in the Welfare and Institutions Code Section 5604.2(a) include reviewing and evaluating the community's public mental health needs and services and advising the governing body and the local mental health director as to any aspect of the local mental health program. Consistent with these duties, the MHB has reviewed the county's immediate behavioral health workforce needs and respectfully submit the following recommendation in order to improve the function of our county's behavioral health services to ensure that our county's residents with mental illness receive the care they deserve.

A National Workforce Crisis

The National Council for Behavioral Health reports that 77% of counties across the country have severe shortages of behavioral health professionals.¹ Two of the largest categories of workers providing mental health services in county behavioral health programs are licensed and associate marriage and family therapists (LMFTs and AMFTS) and licensed and associate clinical social workers (LCSWs and ASWs), accounting for approximately 54% of a county's behavioral health safety net; however, more than 90% of county health agencies throughout the state of California are experiencing significant difficulty recruiting these behavioral health professionals.² Due to the magnitude of this labor shortage, it is being referred to as a behavioral health workforce crisis.

A behavioral health workforce shortage existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. A study conducted by the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis in 2013 estimated that there would be a shortage of more than 10,000 full-time equivalents (FTEs) of mental health and substance abuse social workers and school counselors by 2025.³ The COVID-19 pandemic significantly aggravated pre-existing behavioral health conditions, resulting in even higher levels of demand for behavioral health services.⁴ These factors translate to more demand for behavioral health treatment than an already compromised workforce capacity can deliver. It is important to note that the gap between need and access is wider among some populations. For example, greater proportions of racial and ethnic minorities utilize public

¹ <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Revised-Final-Access-Paper.pdf>

² https://www.calbhbc.org/uploads/5/8/5/3/58536227/cbhda_needs_assessment_final_report_2-23.pdf

³ <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/data-research/behavioral-health-2013-2025.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.healthmanagement.com/wp-content/uploads/HMA-NCMW-Issue-Brief-10-27-21.pdf>

insurance (i.e., Medi-Cal) due to lack of access to private insurance coverage.⁵ Also, people with serious mental illness typically qualify for Medi-Cal through disability status. Yet, people with serious mental illness can experience large rates of Medi-Cal disruptions that lead to increased utilization of acute inpatient services.⁶

The consequences of this behavioral health workforce crisis are extensive. Only one-third of Californians who live with a mental illness currently receive the care they need due to this shortage of behavioral healthcare workers.⁷ Due to high vacancy rates in county behavioral health programs, individuals with mental health and substance use needs face challenges to accessing adequate, timely, and affordable care. Limited access to care can lead to dire consequences such as worsening symptoms, the need for acute care services, subsequent engagement in the criminal justice system and, in some cases, suicide or overdose.⁸ Additionally, the current crisis contributes to long-documented health disparities, including significant and avoidable early mortality for those with behavioral health conditions.⁹

Factors Leading to Workforce Crisis

Unfortunately, the statewide shortage of behavioral health professionals is projected to grow, leaving the state with fewer providers than needed to meet demand by 2028.¹⁰ Recent research shows that 93% of behavioral health workers report being stressed out and stretched too thin and 82% report being emotionally and physically exhausted. Likewise, the top reasons that behavioral health professionals indicated for leaving their positions included insufficient staffing, intensity of workload, and the emotional toll of the job. Long-term strategies for retention and recruitment have been identified as prioritizing purposeful succession planning by redoubling efforts to increase and formalize recruitment pathways between academia and public behavioral health, while more immediate strategies call for addressing stress, burnout, and workplace environment factors.

Major barriers to recruitment and retention of behavioral health professionals include:¹¹

- Challenging work conditions
- Competition from other employers
- Inability to offer competitive pay
- Lengthy hiring processes
- Rigid work schedules
- High cost of living and lack of affordable workforce housing

Current State of Affairs

Sacramento County Division of Behavioral Health Services (BHS) is responsible for providing specialty mental health and substance use and prevention services throughout the County, inclusive of all of the cities. BHS covers inpatient and outpatient Medi-Cal Specialty Mental Health services to all Medi-Cal beneficiaries, including those on a Medi-Cal Managed Care Plan. Covered benefits are for clients with serious and persistent psychiatric illness and children who meet Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) criteria requiring complex biopsychosocial services in order to maintain stability.¹²

⁵ https://wwwn.cdc.gov/NHISDataQueryTool/SHS_adult/index.html

⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34448985/>

⁷ <https://steinberginstitute.org/behavioral-health-workforce-strategy-group/>

⁸ <https://www.healthmanagement.com/wp-content/uploads/HMA-NCMW-Issue-Brief-10-27-21.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00855/full>

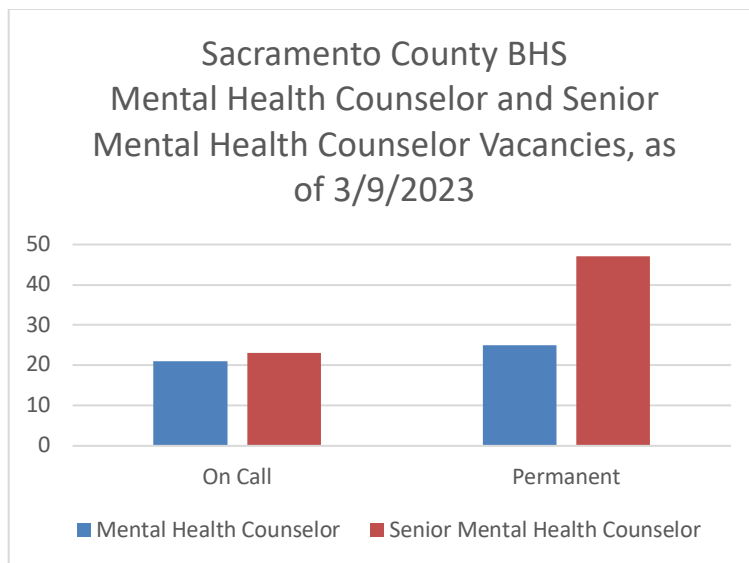
¹⁰ <https://healthforce.ucsf.edu/publications/california-s-current-and-future-behavioral-health-workforce>

¹¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7129a3.htm>

¹² <https://dhs.saccounty.gov/BHS/Documents/GI-MediCal-Behavioral-Health-Quick-Guide.pdf>

To qualify as a Mental Health Counselor or a Senior Mental Health Counselor, a qualified applicant must have a Master's degree from an accredited four-year college or university in a mental health related field such as psychology, counseling, social work, or psychiatric nursing; two years of post-Master's degree supervised experience in a mental health-related setting providing direct services to mentally or emotionally disabled persons; and many positions require current licensure by the State of California to practice as a marriage and family therapist (MFT), clinical social worker (LCSW), clinical psychologist, registered nurse, or psychiatrist.¹³ BHS has both permanent full-time and on-call job types for these positions.

As of 3/9/2023, BHS has 21 on-call and 25 permanent Mental Health Counselor positions vacant. These quantities translate to a 42% vacancy rate for Mental Health Counselors. Additionally, BHS currently has 23 on-call and 47 permanent Senior Mental Health Counselor positions vacant. These quantities translate to a 33% vacancy rate for Senior Mental Health Counselors.



Sacramento County employs Mental Health Counselors and Senior Mental Health Counselors in existing behavioral health programs such as the Intake Stabilization Unit (ISU) of the Mental Health Treatment Center and the Mobile Crisis Support Team, and Senior Mental Health Counselors are employed in new BHS programs such as the Community Wellness Response Team. Additionally, Mental Health Counselors and Senior Mental Health Counselors are employed in Sacramento County Probation Department's Adult Day Reporting Centers.

The vacancies for mental health counselors and senior mental health counselors are concentrated in a majority of BHS programs that are utilized for acute and crisis levels of care, such as the Mental Health Treatment Center, the Mobile Crisis Support Team, the Community Wellness Response Team, and the Adult Day Reporting Centers. These programs are all a part of Sacramento County's Jail Population Reduction Plans, approved by the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors on 12/7/2022 in response to Mays Consent Decree requirements.¹⁴ For example, the Mental Health Treatment Center's Intake Stabilization Unit has a 37.5% vacancy rate and its Psychiatric Health Facility has a 20% vacancy rate for mental health counselors and senior mental health counselors. The Community Wellness Response Team has an 85% vacancy rate for mental health counselors and 100% vacancy rate for Senior Mental Health Counselors. The Adult Day Reporting Center has a 66% vacancy rate,

¹³ <https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/sacramento/jobs/1184113/senior-mental-health-counselor>

¹⁴ https://dce.saccounty.gov/Public-Safety-and-Justice/Documents/Reports_Resources/JailPopulationReductionPlans.pdf

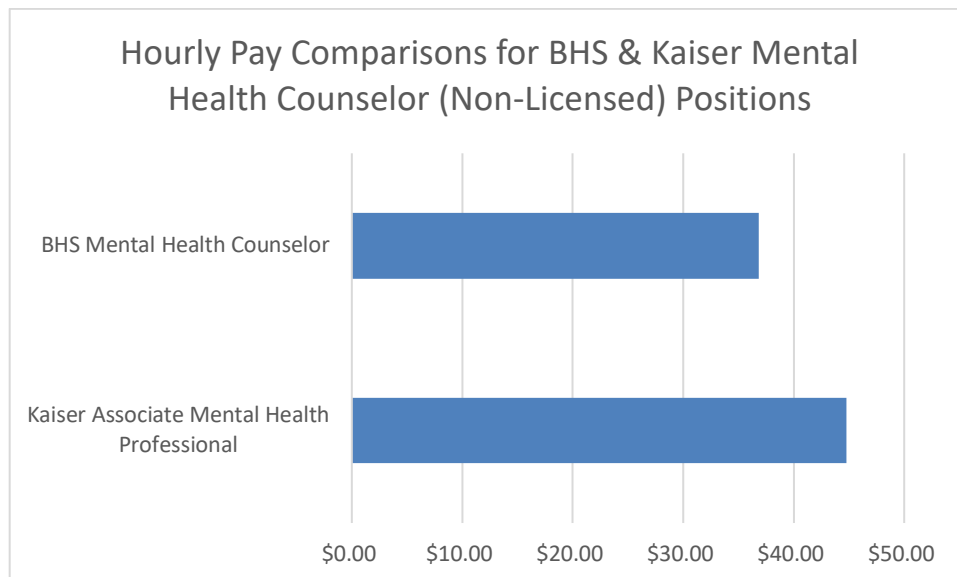
and the Assisted Outpatient Treatment Program has a 50% vacancy rate for these positions. Likewise, the Mobile Crisis Support Team has a 36.3% vacancy rate for mental health counselors and senior mental health counselors.

A Comparative Analysis

Creative solutions by private sector organizations to address the behavioral health workforce crisis include more flexibility for remote work, unlimited paid time off, and summers and Fridays off.¹⁵ In states where the cost of living is high, salaries play a significant role in decision-making. Behavioral health professionals are being recruited by private organizations offering higher pay and flexible work schedules, both of which promote greater mental health for its workers. These positions are attractive because the financial compensation offered is at a level reflecting their demand within the behavioral health care system. For example, the starting hourly wage for a licensed mental health professional with Kaiser Permanente in Northern California is \$52.87.¹⁶ Additionally, the starting hourly wage for a non-licensed, Master’s level mental health professional with Kaiser Permanente in Northern California is \$44.75. Kaiser offers benefitted part-time and full-time positions for these job types.

A comparative analysis of BHS and a large private sector organization that provides behavioral health services in our county (Kaiser Permanente) yielded the following results:

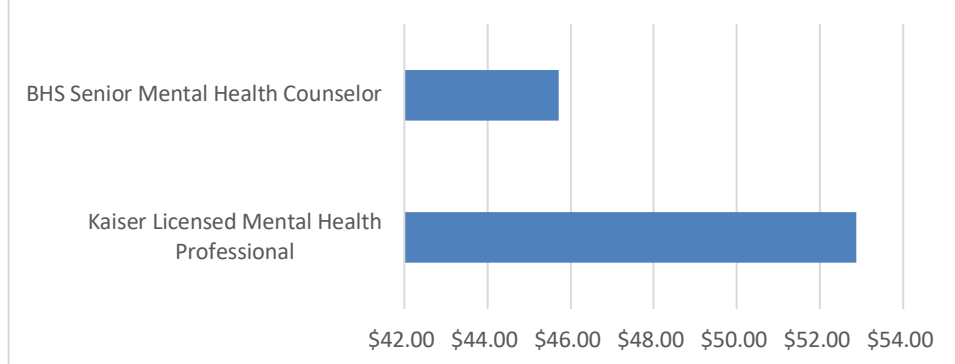
- Kaiser Permanente offers an hourly rate of \$52.87 for the equivalent of their senior mental health counselor positions. BHS offers an hourly rate of \$45.71 for its senior mental health counselor positions. This is a difference of \$7.16 per hour, or 13.5%.
- Kaiser Permanente offers an hourly rate of \$44.75 for the equivalent of their mental health counselor positions. BHS offers an hourly rate of \$36.86 for its mental health counselor positions. This is a difference of \$7.89 per hour, or 17.6%.



¹⁵ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-12-20/la-me-mental-health-workers-los-angeles>

¹⁶ <https://www.kaiserpermanentejobs.org/job/sacramento/licensed-masters-mental-health-professional/641/46358440976>

Hourly Pay Comparisons for BHS & Kaiser Senior Mental Health Counselor (Licensed) Positions



Recommendation

The following recommendation is intended to be a short-term policy lever to quickly impact workforce availability and retention.

Future supply and demand are important factors when considering long-term recruitment and retention efforts; however, an immediate response is desperately needed in order for Sacramento County to have the behavioral health workforce needed for the sufficient functioning of its behavioral health division. By immediately addressing the significant understaffing of the county's behavioral health workforce as a financial priority, full and timely services can be provided to individuals with mental health needs. To ensure that all Sacramento County residents have their behavioral health care needs met, our County must have the behavioral health workforce needed to meet the urgent and ongoing needs for care.

It is recommended that the hourly rate at which BHS Mental Health Counselors are compensated be increased by 13.5%, and the hourly rate at which Senior Mental Health Counselors are compensated be increased by 17.6%, to be competitive with the private behavioral health sector in order to recruit and retain qualified candidates for positions with the highest vacancy rates in BHS. In addition, it is recommended that the County offer benefitted flexible work schedules for these positions. These recommendations are aligned with strategies recommended by the California Behavioral Health Boards and Commissions (CALBHB/C)¹⁷ as well as the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS).¹⁸ The MHB understands that implementation of this recommendation entails negotiating with the labor bargaining unit representing the Sacramento County BHS Mental Health Counselors, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Local 146, AFL-CIO. Further, the MHB recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct county staff to conduct a complete compensation package study, including retirement benefits between current county MHC and SMHC positions and those comparable positions offered in the private sector.

Additionally, it is recommended that BHS continue its commitment to providing culturally responsive services to address disparities in behavioral health care by ensuring the recruitment, training, and retention of diverse culturally and linguistically competent

¹⁷ https://www.calbhbc.org/uploads/5/8/5/3/58536227/annual_goals_2023.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.workforce.buildingcalhhs.com/media/333/download?inline>

Mental Health Counselors and Senior Mental Health Counselors for the public mental health system.

Thank you for consideration of our recommendations. If you have any questions, please contact me at (916) 202-1890 or by email at corrine@drcorrinemcintosh.com.

Sincerely,

Corrine McIntosh Sako, Psy.D., LMFT

Corrine McIntosh Sako Psy.D. LMFT, Chairperson
Sacramento County Mental Health Board

cc: Ryan Quist, PhD, Behavioral Health Director