Emerging Occupations: Behavioral Health

April 2025 Newsletter

Brandon Anaya
Seattle Jobs Initiative

Introduction

Agencies committed to fighting poverty likely have significant contextual awareness of the connection between economic and mental well-being, and research linking the two gained momentum just prior to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. More recently, a groundbreaking study demonstrated a causal relationship between poverty and mental illness, meaning that community action agencies seeking strategies to address economic and social needs may want to consider an emerging occupational sector that does both: behavioral health. Even more encouraging, many of the occupations within this sector now have registered apprenticeship pathways, meaning that participants can earn while they learn.

Why it Matters

While mental illness as a public health risk certainly predates COVID-19, the pandemic appeared to be a tipping point in the crisis. Post-COVID, 90% of Americans believe the U.S. is experiencing a mental health crisis. Since the pandemic, there has been a 38% increase among mental health care patients. And because mental health risks present a spectrum of challenges, there are multiple, distinct crises with their own, unique consequences. According to a Pew report, our communities are struggling to address mental illness, a youth mental health epidemic and substance abuse. The human toll of this crisis is only exacerbated by its social, economic and workforce impacts, and those suffering from mental illness often face employment barriers, making it even more difficult to break the cycle of poverty.

A Unifying Concern

The mental health crisis knows no boundaries. It is an urban issue and a rural issue. It affects both blue and red states, the young and the old, the rich and the poor. A recent study even found that

there are no statistically significant differences by political affiliation. Perhaps for this reason, mental health has been identified as "the bipartisan issue of our time." In spite of well-founded concerns about the uncertainty in Washington, SAMHSA continues (for the time being) to issue federal grants addressing mental health, and HHS recently renewed its commitment to addressing the opioid epidemic. Over half of state governors have identified mental health as a policy priority, and the National Governor's Association has called attention to a number of ambitious approaches across the country.

Particularly encouraging is the fact that many states are addressing the crisis through workforce solutions. The National Academy for State Health Policy just released a report highlighting how states are addressing recruitment, training and retention of mental and behavioral health professionals. Innovative training programs have been developed for entry level workers, and more options now exist for sub-baccalaureate award holders, including certificates, apprenticeships and other work-based learning credentials.

Resources

Recognizing the depth of the crisis, many foundations have contributed their own resources to the cause. Of note to human service agencies that provide training, these philanthropic organizations have been especially supportive of new approaches to expanding behavioral health pathways. The Ballmer Group, for instance, gifted $38 million to a coalition of programs, including $5.5 million for behavioral health apprenticeships, $3 million for behavioral health support specialists, and over $20 million in student financial aid. Similarly, the Goodness Web Foundation has made significant investments in the behavioral health workforce, including a recent $1 million grant to develop apprenticeship degrees. Other investments have been made on a local or regional level, including awards from the Patrick P. Lee Foundation and Arcora Foundation, and giving is likely to continue to meet this ever growing challenge.

Emerging Occupations: Behavioral Health

Sample Occupation – Peer Support Specialist

Peer Support Specialists, sometimes referred to as peer counselors, peer specialists or certified peer specialists, are mental health workers who themselves have an experience with a mental, behavioral or substance disorder. While the occupation is not specifically tracked by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, many states define and certify these critical roles. Training is typically not a barrier to most prospective applicants, and can be covered by resources such as SNAP E&T. For agencies interested this occupation, there are existing resources, including training manuals and frequently asked questions worth exploring. Some community action agencies have already added peer support to their training options, and would a good resource for starting your own. This is an occupation grounded in local community participation and impact.

Spotlight Program: Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist

Community Action Marin launched the Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist two years ago. Participants develop 17 core behavioral health skills in a 12-week, 80-hour program leading to state certification (and a stepping stone to a mental health career).

For more information, visit:

https://camarin.org/peer-support-specialist-training/

Over the past three years, Seattle Jobs Initiative has conducted an evaluation of the Behavioral Health Apprenticeship programs developed by the SEIU Healthcare 1199NW Multi-Employer Training Fund. If you are interested in learning more about behavioral health pathways, the team at SJI is happy to assist.

Brandon Anaya is the Vice President for Consulting & Policy at Seattle Jobs Initiative, and a former community college dean overseeing apprenticeship. Feel free to reach out with questions – banaya@seattlejobsinit.com