

BHECN



Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska

BHECN | BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
EDUCATION CENTER
OF NEBRASKA

LEGISLATIVE REPORT
FY 2022 & 2023

22-23



Table of Contents

01

Director's greeting:
Reflecting on
mentorship and
BHECN's role

05

Mentorship grounds
students in behavioral
health careers

08

Research ensures work
is data driven

11

ARPA — A landmark
opportunity

15

Rural sites help
BHECN meet
local behavioral
health needs

18

A guiding light for
other states

DIRECTOR'S GREETING



Reflecting on mentorship and BHECN's role

When I was a medical student, on my family medicine rotation, our team worked with a patient who presented with what appeared to be treatment-resistant diabetes. He had been prescribed a variety of medicines and interventions and nothing helped his condition.

Then we had the occasion to talk to his wife who informed us that the patient had not actually taken the prescribed medicines or followed the other advice his doctors had given him for one simple reason.

“He’s horrifically depressed,” she said.

This was a thunderbolt moment for me as it became clear that this patient had no chance at recovery until his mental health needs were addressed. This also was the moment that I realized what I wanted to do with my career — I wanted to be a psychiatrist and work to improve unmet mental and behavioral health needs and improve access to care.



MARLEY DOYLE, MD
BHECN Director

Initially I did not have a lot of help or guidance to start down this professional path but eventually I did connect with one outstanding and dedicated mentor. This person helped me see the steps I needed to take and provided encouragement and support to see the path was navigable, viable and most importantly, the right path for me. I cannot overstate how important this mentor was on my journey into behavioral health.

This experience is a key reason I am so passionate about the work we do at the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska (BHECN) because at our heart, we aim to provide that same kind of support and encouragement to those who seek to work or already do work as behavioral health providers in Nebraska.

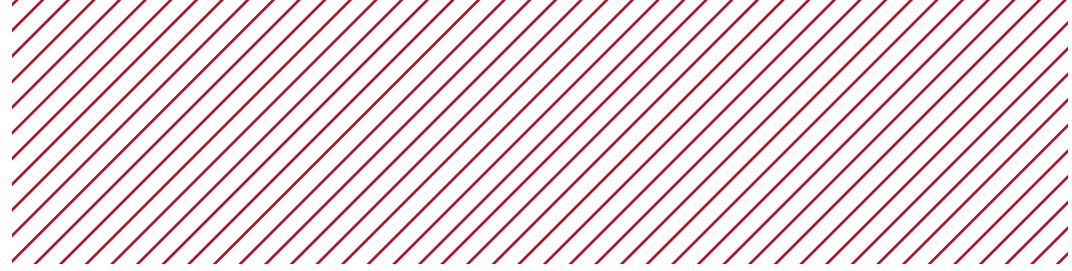
We also believe our efforts in this regard are more important than ever as the state faces a critical shortage of behavioral health workers at a time when the need for behavioral health care is higher than it has ever been.

The recognition of the need for behavioral health services also is at a high point and this was reflected by two major Legislative developments that occurred in the past year:

- » The passage of a measure that increased BHECN’s budget by more than \$2 million annually; and
- » BHECN being charged with the distribution of more than \$25.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to providers and others around the state to help address the state’s workforce shortage and other behavioral health issues that were created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the following report, we highlight some of the work our team at BHECN has undertaken with the support of the Nebraska Legislature that allows us to conduct our mission and ultimately help improve behavioral health among our state’s residents.





In the ensuing pages, we discuss mentoring programs to support college students going into behavioral health and training programs that help students connect with behavioral health careers.

We write about the one-of-a-kind research BHECN conducts about our state’s behavioral health workforce and how that research ultimately informs the kind of programs we design to best target our state’s workforce needs.

We discuss some of the innovative programming we are helping start and support with the allocation of the ARPA dollars.

We write about steps we take to ensure our behavioral health workforce is reflective of and responsive to the diverse needs, backgrounds and experiences of our state’s residents and we show how the work BHECN does is not only serving the needs of students and behavioral health professionals in Nebraska but it also is a model for other states looking to address their own workforce challenges.

The Nebraska Legislature over the years has shown tremendous foresight and wisdom in creating and supporting BHECN to address key behavioral health needs as this has positioned it to help meet this pivotal moment where more people understand just how important mental and behavioral health care is to our society.

We are excited to share this report with you and to discuss the important work our team is doing to help strengthen our state’s behavioral health workforce and help improve lives for Nebraskans. ■



NEXT

Powerful mentorship

One-of-a-kind research

Innovative programming

Mentorship grounds students in behavioral health careers



Mentorship is playing a key role in Robyn Springer's new career journey. After spending the previous 30 years helping run a successful family roofing business, Springer, 52, is now enrolled in the licensed mental health practitioner master's program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. She intends to be a counselor in the area after she graduates in 2025.

Springer decided to switch careers after experiences in her personal life helped her discover her passion for behavioral health and helping others deal with behavioral health issues.

Once enrolled, UNK psychology professor Krista Fritson, PsyD, became her advisor. Dr. Fritson also is the Director of BHECN Central.

Dr. Fritson encouraged Springer to become involved with BHECN and in particular to attend and participate in various events and activities that are coordinated by the BHECN Central office.

Springer followed the advice and has since become a regular volunteer at social and educational events that BHECN Central sponsors. Taking these steps has helped Springer get engrained with the local behavioral health community and connect with local behavioral health professionals who are helping mentor her as she goes through her graduate program and who will become her colleagues once she graduates and becomes a therapist in the Kearney area.

"This is giving me experience in dealing with these working professionals that I wouldn't be getting if BHECN wasn't here," Springer said.

While facilitating mentorship experiences like the ones Springer has enjoyed has always been a key function of BHECN, the organization in the past year increased its commitment to ensure more behavioral health students have impactful mentorship, said Roger Garcia, DMin, MPA, MTS, Associate Director of Recruitment and Retention.

"Solid mentorship is one of the strongest ways we can work to recruit, train and retain behavioral workers and by extension alleviate the shortage of behavioral health care workers in Nebraska," Dr. Garcia said.

Dr. Garcia, who started with BHECN in 2022, has led the launch of BHECN's Mentoring Program, which pairs licensed behavioral health care workers with students training in behavioral health care programs at various colleges and universities around the state.

Thus far, about 30 behavioral health care workers from across the state have volunteered to serve as mentors in the new BHECN program and each of these will be paired with a behavioral health student over the next year.

Robyn Springer, left, found a mentor in BHECN Central Director Krista Fritson, PsyD. Dr. Fritson has guided Springer toward volunteer opportunities and other activities that have helped the future counselor plug into the professional community she will enter when she joins the behavioral health workforce.



This is giving me experience in dealing with these working professionals that I wouldn't be getting if BHECN wasn't here.

ROBYN SPRINGER
Master's Student



The program provides students entering this field with robust mentorship experiences, Dr. Garcia said, noting that it allows them to meet regularly with their mentors to learn what working in the various fields is really like and get guidance on how to truly advance in their fields. Both mentors and mentees commit to being matched and engaged with the mentoring program for one academic year to help ensure larger impact on the students' academic, personal and career journeys.

The goal in future years is to recruit even more mentors to help an increasing number of students have strong mentorship as they work through school and enter their career fields, Dr. Garcia said.

"It's hard to overstate how important and impactful good mentors can be in helping students successfully navigate their career paths," Dr. Garcia said. "We are very excited to be able to help as many behavioral health students in Nebraska have just those kinds of experiences as they work toward becoming licensed professionals in our state." ■

Above: Robyn Springer participates in a class at UNK. (Photo courtesy of UNK Communications.)

30

behavioral health care workers have volunteered to serve as mentors in the new BHECN mentoring program thus far.



Research ensures work is data driven

A key component of BHECN's work is its research of Nebraska's behavioral health workforce, which helps ensure the steps BHECN takes to grow the workforce are backed by data and targeted to meet the real needs of the state.

An example of BHECN's research-driven approach occurred in 2022 following the publication of BHECN research in the American Psychological Association's Journal of Rural Mental Health.

The study examined the rates at which Nebraska behavioral health professionals transitioned from being temporarily or provisionally licensed to fully licensed from 2009 to 2019. A main finding was the conversion rates from provisionally licensed to fully licensed in various behavioral health professions was often below 65 percent. This means that in many cases, more than 30% of those training to be behavioral health professionals in Nebraska did not achieve full licensure.



LATEST DATA SHOW WORKFORCE HAS GROWN, MAJOR CHALLENGES REMAIN

According to our 2023 workforce data analysis, Nebraska's behavioral health **workforce has grown by 44%** since BHECN's inception in 2009.

Despite these gains, there is more work to be done. According to the Health Resources and Services Administration, Nebraska has less than half of the behavioral health workforce needed to adequately meet the state's need, and **88 of Nebraska's 93 counties are mental health professional shortage areas.**

BHECN's latest workforce data also indicates that **the workforce continues to age.** This is

most apparent among licensed drug and alcohol counselors, as more than half are older than 56.

Additionally, **urban areas continue to outpace rural regions in the supply of the behavioral health workforce,** particularly among psychiatrists and psychologists.

Finding ways to help address these challenges will be a major focus of the BHECN team in the coming years.

Visit <https://go.unmc.edu/bhdashboard> to see the dashboard!

The findings from the report influenced how BHECN would disseminate the ARPA dollars.

"As a result of our own research, we knew it was important to support projects and organizations around the state that are working to help get more people fully licensed," said Jessie Buche, MPH, MA, Director of the ARPA Awards Program.

BHECN ultimately allocated about \$1.8 million in ARPA funds to support 22 projects that focus on increasing the number of fully licensed behavioral health workers in Nebraska, Buche said.

A key feature of BHECN's research is the Nebraska Behavioral Health Workforce Dashboard – a one-of-a-kind tracking tool that BHECN maintains and that allows researchers to monitor the distribution of behavioral health workers around the state.

The dashboard contains data that provides BHECN staff, university leaders, policymakers and others with information needed to clearly

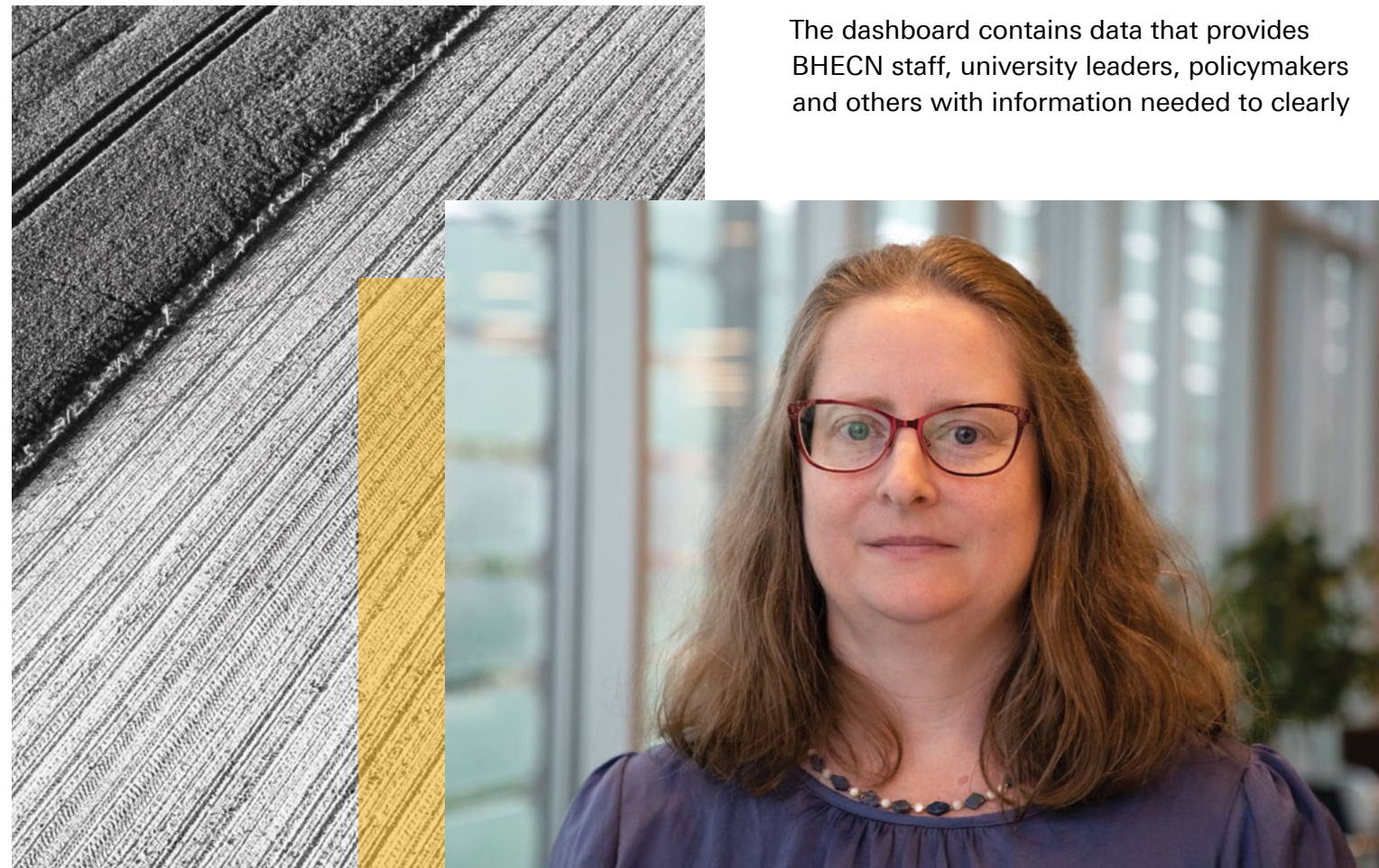
see trends in the state's behavioral health workforce, including what and where shortages exist, said Kendra Ratnapradipa, PhD, who recently took over for Dr. Watanabe-Galloway as BHECN's Associate Director for Research.

This data helps BHECN staff, policymakers and other end users determine optimal interventions and strategies for addressing shortages, said Dr. Ratnapradipa, who noted that looking ahead, the next step is to increase evaluation of the data in the dashboard as well as of the programs and interventions that are born from the data. This evaluation will help ensure efforts to grow and improve the workforce are effective, she said.

"BHECN is in many cases a national leader in behavioral health workforce analysis and research because we are one of the few organizations that collect and explore this type of data," Dr. Ratnapradipa said. "I am very excited to build off the foundation Dr. Watanabe-Galloway laid here as there is vast potential for our data and analysis to improve behavioral health care in our state." ■

"In a state where 88 of 93 counties are designated as not having enough behavioral health workers, we need to examine and eliminate barriers to getting people licensed and working in these fields," said Shinobu Watanabe-Galloway, PhD, who was the lead author of the paper and who recently completed a seven-year term as BHECN's Associate Director for Research. "This study helped us explore why significant numbers of workers aren't achieving full licensure."

Just a few months later, BHECN was able to translate the study's findings into action when the Nebraska Legislature charged BHECN with allocating \$25.5 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to organizations around the state looking to address the state's behavioral health workforce shortage and other mental health issues that were created or exacerbated by the pandemic.



BHECN is in many cases a national leader in behavioral health workforce analysis and research because we are one of the few organizations that collect and explore this type of data.

KENDRA RATNAPRADIPA, PHD
Associate Director for Research



ARPA — A landmark opportunity



Supervision for training behavioral health students and partially or provisionally licensed behavioral health providers — or more accurately, a lack of supervisors — is a major factor in Nebraska’s behavioral health workforce shortage.

As part of their career paths — many behavioral health students and provisionally licensed trainees — must spend time working with fully-licensed providers to complete their course work and licensure requirements.

The struggle comes in finding enough licensed providers to supervise the students and provisionally licensed providers. A major reason this is so because fully licensed providers receive little to no compensation for their time supervising students and provisionally licensed providers.

Pictured Left: Jessie Buche, MPH, MA, Director of the ARPA Awards Program

\$25.5 MILLION

in American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to Nebraska behavioral health providers

From left: Rob Taillon (ARPA supported Intern), Jessica Vickers, LIMHP, LPC, NCC (Owner & Therapist), and Denise Bredthauer (Office Manager) at Live Well Counseling in Kearney. Live Well received ARPA funding to support the supervision of counseling interns and provisionally licensed therapists. Taillon is supervised by Vickers. The center also received ARPA support to help provide more telebehavioral health, which is essential to meeting needs, particularly in rural parts of the state.



“The lack of compensation has caused many licensed providers in Nebraska to forgo being supervisors because they need to take time away from their practices to provide that service,” said Jessie Buche, MPH, MA, Director of the ARPA Awards Program. “This has made it difficult to help students find needed internships and led many provisionally licensed providers to never achieve full licensure.”

The issue of supervision is so pervasive that addressing it was a key focus of two categories in BHECN’s dissemination of more than \$25.5 million in American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to Nebraska behavioral health providers. Much of the \$11.7 million that BHECN disseminated in the Behavioral Health Training and Opportunities Category — the largest award category in the BHECN ARPA Program — went to providers around the state to support supervision of behavioral health student internships. Another entire category of awards was dedicated to supervision of provisionally licensed providers.

The BHECN ARPA Program presents an unprecedented opportunity to make significant headway on addressing the shortage.

JESSIE BUCHE, MPH, MA
Director of the ARPA Awards Program

“Lack of supervision is not a problem that is unique to Nebraska but the approach we’re taking with the ARPA dollars is different than what you see in most other places around the country,” Buche said.

Some other states offer supervisors tax benefits for doing such work but the ARPA funds are allowing some to provide direct reimbursement for supervision and this could be a game changer, she said.

Novel and innovative solutions to other major behavioral health workforce challenges also are being implemented thanks to the ARPA funds, Buche said, noting that along with funding to increase training and supervision, BHECN disseminated:

- » About \$7 million for Telebehavioral Health in Rural Areas
- » About \$2.2 million for projects that address behavioral health workforce projects related to the pandemic

To distribute the dollars, BHECN put together and executed a comprehensive review and dissemination process that allowed the organization to have selected recipients for all funds by July of 2023. The dollars will be distributed through 2025.

In total, 105 projects throughout the state were awarded BHECN-ARPA funds.

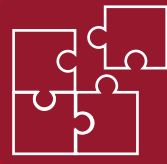
“The shortage of behavioral health care workers is rooted in many factors and resolving it will require approaching it from multiple angles,” Buche said. “The BHECN ARPA Program presents an unprecedented opportunity to make significant headway on addressing the shortage.”

And the project stands to have benefits that reverberate well beyond Nebraska, said Erin O. Schneider, EdD, BHECN Associate Director for External Affairs, noting that BHECN has built an evaluation component into the ARPA program that will allow researchers to study the various projects to see how effective they are, how they can be improved and how they could be implemented elsewhere.

“Thanks to BHECN, Nebraska has long been a leader in behavioral health workforce research,” Dr. Schneider said. “Now, we are in a position to have findings and innovations gleaned from this remarkable program published and used in such a way that could improve behavioral health care and improved lives not just here in Nebraska but also across the nation.” ■

Donny Larson and Women’s Empowering Lifeline in Norfolk received ARPA funding to increase behavioral health training at their clinic. In total, 105 projects across the state received ARPA dollars to help address behavioral health needs.





Rural sites help BHECN meet local behavioral health needs

The challenges for Nebraska’s behavioral health providers can vary widely depending on the part of the state in which they practice.

A recent example of this was on display as BHECN opened its Northeast Site at Wayne State College. The site is BHECN’s third Rural Site, joining sites at the University of Nebraska at Kearney – BHECN Central – and the Chadron State College – BHECN Panhandle. BHECN plans to eventually have sites established in all six of Nebraska’s behavioral health regions.

“The sites allow BHECN to carry out its mission across the state in a way that fits the distinct needs of the region,” said Christine Chasek, PhD, BHECN’s Associate Director of Rural Development, who directed BHECN Central from 2016 to 2021.



Cierra Afrank, MSE, LMHP, CPC, Director of BHECN Northeast

For instance, Northeast Nebraska, which the newly opened BHECN Northeast Site serves, is a tri-state area and many behavioral health providers in the region practice in Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota. Many of these providers encounter complex licensure and telehealth regulations with clients seeking services across state lines.

“Given the unique challenge that many providers in our region face, a major focus for BHECN Northeast will be providing training and other resources to help them maintain licensure so they can continue to serve Nebraska residents,” said Cierra Afrank, Director of BHECN Northeast.

Given the unique challenge that many providers in our region face, a major focus for BHECN Northeast will be providing training and other resources to help them maintain licensure so they can continue to serve Nebraska residents.

CIERRA AFRANK, MSE, LMHP, CPC
Director of BHECN Northeast



The rural sites are a strong tool in helping BHECN strengthen the state’s behavioral health workforce, said Marley Doyle, MD, Director of BHECN.

“Nebraska is a large and diverse state, and that means providers, students and trainees face different challenges based on what part of the state in which they work,” Dr. Doyle said. “We’re thrilled to see the northeast site come online and help us better serve the needs of those who live and work in that part of the state.”

Wayne State College is “excited and honored to serve and support the Behavioral Health

Education Center of Nebraska’s mission to recruit and retain behavioral health professionals in Northeast Nebraska,” said Steven Elliott, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Wayne State. “I have been impressed with the level of collaboration between UNMC and Wayne State throughout the development of this important partnership with BHECN and look forward to supporting the expansion of training opportunities for the rural behavioral health workforce in Nebraska.” ■



A guiding light for other states



While BHECN plays a key role in helping address the state of Nebraska’s shortage of behavioral health care workers, the organization also serves as a model for other states that face similar issues.

The most recent example of this came earlier this year when the Nevada Legislature passed a measure to create a behavioral health workforce center that is largely modeled off BHECN.

In fact, it was attending a webinar about BHECN’s work that gave Sara Hunt, PhD., of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, the idea to start a similar center in The Silver State.

“BHECN certainly served as a blueprint for what we are creating here,” said Dr. Hunt, Assistant Dean of Behavioral Health Sciences at the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine at UNLV and Director of the UNLV Mental/Behavioral Health Training Coalition.

It's gratifying to know that others can look to the work we do here in Nebraska to help strengthen the workforce and improve care in other parts of the country.

MARLEY DOYLE, MD
Director of BHECN



Sara Hunt, PhD, (center) Assistant Dean of Behavioral Health Sciences at the Kerkorian School of Medicine at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, talks with BHECN's Erin Schneider, EdD, (left) and Marley Doyle, MD, (right) at a BHECN conference earlier in this year. Dr. Hunt incorporated major features of BHECN's structure and mission in advancing legislation to create a similar behavioral health workforce center in Nevada. BHECN's model also helped influence the creation of a similar center in Illinois.

After attending the webinar, Dr. Hunt took up the cause and for the past several years, she helped spearhead a legislative effort to get a BHECN-type center created in her state, which has some of the same geographical and demographic challenges that face Nebraska.

Like Nebraska, Nevada has two major metro areas – Las Vegas and Reno – while the rest of the state is largely rural and frontier land. Another similarity between the two states is the vast majority of both states are designated as having shortages of behavioral health workers.

“Throughout most of the state, we don’t have enough people to help meet the behavioral health needs,” Dr. Hunt said, noting that the county Las Vegas sits in actually is considered a shortage area.

Like BHECN does in Nebraska, the new Nevada center will work to address the shortage by introducing and connecting young people to

behavioral health careers while supporting providers already working in the fields by providing education, training and other resources to help them do their jobs and continue to work in the state, Dr. Hunt said.

Throughout the process of getting the legislation passed to create the Nevada center, Dr. Hunt and others from Nevada spoke regularly with BHECN officials to get guidance on how to create a workforce development center and how to get it passed through the legislative process.

Their work paid off in June when Nevada lawmakers approved funding to create a center, which will be a collaborative operation between UNLV and other Nevada System of Higher Education institutions. The goal is for the new center to be operational by the end of 2023, Dr. Hunt said.

With the creation of the new center, Nevada becomes the third state to have such an organization, joining Nebraska and Illinois,

which in 2018 passed nearly identical legislation to what Nebraska used to create BHECN when starting its Behavioral Health Workforce Center. Officials in Connecticut also have consulted with BHECN as they begin discussions about creating a behavioral health workforce center in that state.

Having other states emulate BHECN's efforts is validating and rewarding and it helps highlight the wisdom Nebraska policymakers have shown in creating and supporting the organization over the years, said BHECN Director Marley Doyle, MD.

“It’s gratifying to know that others can look to the work we do here in Nebraska to help strengthen the workforce and improve care in other parts of the country,” Dr. Doyle said. “It makes me proud to be part of the amazing BHECN team and it should be a point of pride for all who are involved in supporting and advancing our work.” ■

BHECN

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
EDUCATION CENTER
OF NEBRASKA

984242 NE Medical Center
Omaha, NE 68198-4242
402-552-7697
unmc.edu/bhecn/

