

Introduction & Background

Nebraska, like many states, faces a behavioral health workforce crisis. In response, the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska (BHECN) formed the Nebraska Behavioral Health Workforce Partnership (NEBWP) to create a statewide, coordinated approach to workforce solutions by offering a platform for statewide discussion, learning, and planning.

In June 2025, the inaugural NEBWP Summit brought together nearly 30 stakeholders affiliated with the partnership. Attendees represented 21 different organizations in Nebraska and offered a wide range of perspectives, including behavioral health educators, providers, students, and system-level leaders. Together, this group aimed to accomplish the following four strategic goals:

- **Learn from national behavioral health workforce trends and explore state-specific solutions**
- **Connect workforce leaders across sectors to align efforts and reduce silos**
- **Identify Nebraska's most pressing behavioral health workforce needs**
- **Develop a collaborative, statewide plan grounded in local input and shared goals**

This report summarizes the recurring challenges, strategies, and proposed recommendations identified through NEBWP-led discussions that focused on the three priority topics of training & professional support, career awareness & preparation, and outreach & engagement. The report also lays the foundation for a strategic workforce plan to guide future investment and action.

Summary of Identified Current Challenges

The behavioral health workforce continues to face persistent and multifaceted issues that limit access to care and strain the system. When identifying current challenges, summit attendees noted that **geographic maldistribution of providers** leaves many rural and underserved communities without adequate services. A **shortage of specialty providers**, including those trained in **child and adolescent care**, further constrains access for vulnerable populations.

Attendees also indicated that these gaps are intensified by Nebraska's growing demand for behavioral health services, which has outpaced workforce capacity and led to long waitlists and fragmented referral systems.

Additional identified challenges that further compound the workforce crisis include:

- **Financial barriers** for students and trainees
- **Supervision and licensing hurdles**
- **Mismatch between academic preparation and real-world practice demands**
- **Limited training and career advancement opportunities** for individuals with lived experience or from rural backgrounds
- **High turnover** and lack of coordinated statewide systems.

Summary of Identified Recommendations and Proposed Strategies

The following section overviews strategies and recommendations identified by Summit attendees that could be used to address these current challenges.

1. Enhance Access to Training, Preparation, and Support

Several innovative and collaborative strategies emerged to enhance behavioral health workforce development in Nebraska. The following strategies and recommendations aim to reduce attrition, improve readiness, and create access to training and employment opportunities in behavioral health.

- **Embed Real-World Skills into Training:** Add business training to graduate programs and open micro-credentialing pathways that validate the skills and contributions of individuals with lived experience or those changing careers (e.g., teachers).
- **Expand Training Access:** Expand statewide CEUs, residencies, and supervised placements in clinics, schools, and community settings, with an emphasis on rural.
- **Promote Flexible Supervision Models:** Pilot tele-supervision and group models that can scale across rural regions while meeting licensure requirements.
- **Reform and Fund Supervision in High-Need Areas:** Establish a state-funded supervision stipend program for provisionally licensed professionals, prioritizing rural and high-need areas. Support policies that allow provisionally licensed providers to bill insurance under supervision which would expand access while supporting the workforce pipeline.

2. Strengthening Career Awareness & Entry Pipelines

Building a sustainable behavioral health workforce requires proactive investment in career awareness and pipeline development. The following key strategies aim to improve visibility and accessibility in behavioral health workforce entry and long-term development.

- **Increase Career Awareness Early:** Develop “Pathways to Careers” guides and partner with school counselors to introduce students to behavioral health options.
- **Strengthen Recruitment & Entry Pipelines:** Develop tailored outreach, mentorship, and training pipelines for rural and historically underrepresented (e.g., Native populations) youth. Foster collaboration across schools and health care and mobilize private sector investment (modeled after STEM initiatives).
- **Support Multidisciplinary Student Retention:** Offer stipends at key milestones and design mentorship, job shadowing, and classroom programs for high school and undergraduate students.

3. Streamlining Communication and Systems Alignment

To build a sustainable and coordinated behavioral health workforce, Nebraska must prioritize stronger connections across systems and stakeholders. Aligning efforts, reducing administrative barriers, and speaking with a shared voice will not only improve efficiency but also amplify impact. By fostering collaboration and creating structures for accountability, we can ensure that every initiative moves us closer to a unified vision for accessible behavioral health care.

- **Host Annual Workforce Convenings:** Create space for cross-sector stakeholders to share progress, realign efforts, and explore innovations, modeled after the initial partner conference.
- **Adopt and Promote a Common Framework:** Establish shared language and priority areas to reduce fragmentation and improve collective collaboration.
- **Streamline DHHS and Medicaid Requirements:** Facilitate a standing advisory group (possibly coordinated by BHECN) to reduce administrative barriers and align workforce policy priorities across systems.
- **Track Progress Towards Goals:** Incorporate evaluation metrics to assess the reach and accessibility of all workforce programs.

Future Investment in NEBWP and Nebraska

While Nebraska's behavioral health workforce faces significant challenges, these obstacles also present powerful opportunities for innovation and change.

The geographic disparities in the distribution of providers and shortage of specialists highlight the urgency - and potential - to grow and bolster our workforce in ways that truly meet the needs of communities across the state. Rising demand for services, though straining the system today, signals a growing recognition of the importance of behavioral health and opens the door for bold investments in people and programs.

By addressing financial barriers for students, reimagining supervision and licensure pathways, and strengthening connections between training and practice, we can cultivate a workforce that is not only **more prepared but also more resilient and representative of Nebraska's communities**.

With shared vision and coordinated effort, these challenges can serve as a **catalyst for a stronger behavioral health system for all Nebraskans**.