

Essential Medicaid Reform: Building a Stronger Mental Health Workforce for Pennsylvania's Children

Pennsylvania's Mental Health Workforce Shortage

The worker shortage among child-serving mental health providers in Pennsylvania schools and communities has spiraled into a crisis. Pennsylvania has one school psychologist for every 997 students and one school social worker for every 3,416 students.¹ When surveyed, 75% of youth mental health provider programs within PA communities reported having some vacant positions and 25% reported more than 30 vacant positions.² Youth in PA face a dearth of mental health professionals who can help them access mental health services, presenting a significant barrier to children's mental wellbeing. Compounding the workforce shortage, the pathway to licensure for graduates with MA/MS in Psychology or MSW degrees is particularly burdensome, requiring 3,000 hours of clinical supervision—often paid for out of pocket—which limits the pipeline of professionals available to serve children.

Expanding the Circle of Care

To address the workforce problem, Pennsylvania must broaden the class of professionals that can provide meet the nascent mental health needs of children and thereby reserve the time of expensive highly trained professionals for those with serious, chronic mental illness. By adopting a mental health workforce solution that is based on creating new career pathways through adding certifications or endorsements to existing credentials, community-based professionals will expand delivery of critically needed [Universal \(Tier 1\) and Targeted Early Engagement \(Tier 2\) services](#). With Medicaid authorization of these professionals more children will have access to the timely, preventive services they need.

Specifically, broadening the pool of providers will:

1. **Expand Access:** More certified professionals will reduce wait times and ensure timely care.

¹ <https://hopefulfutures.us/action-pennsylvania/>

² <https://pccyfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Workforce-Shortage-Final-11.17.21.pdf>

2. **Create Career Pathways:** Offering certifications and endorsements for community-based professionals opens new career paths, especially for individuals from underserved communities.
3. **Ensure Early Support:** Non-clinical professionals can provide preventive care and early engagement, ensuring that children receive mental health services sooner.
4. **Improve Cost Efficiency:** By using certified professionals for Universal (Tier 1) and Targeted Early Engagement (Tier 2) services, we can reduce the need for intensive, expensive mental health services down the line, saving the system money.

Recommendations for Reform

The Pennsylvania Medicaid program must cover care provided by trained, non-clinical mental health professionals who are more likely to have lived experience and/or cultural competencies that can help youth heal and avoid the onset of chronic illness. PA can deploy these three core options to expand the mental health workforce:

1. Establish Specific Population Endorsements for Certified Peer Specialists and Community Health Workers

The state credentialing board can establish “endorsements” to existing credentials based on new training and competencies that qualify the individual’s services as Medicaid eligible. Endorsements provide pathways for career advancement and professional development to meet the needs of parents, children, and youth. In Pennsylvania, the Association of Infant Mental Health already has endorsements recognized by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) for infant and early childhood mental health promotion and expertise.

While Certified Peer Support Specialists in PA are currently permitted to receive additional training for “enhancements” to work with specific populations, formal “endorsements” of competency for high-demand populations are not available. Community Health Workers also do not have endorsements to work with parents of infants and young children with emerging mental health needs.

The following endorsements for Certified Peer Support Specialists and Community Health Workers should be developed:

- Youth and young adult mental health
- Maternal and perinatal mental health

- Infant and early childhood mental health
- School-based mental health
- Crisis

2. Expand the Ages Youth Peer Support Specialists Can Serve

Youth Peer Support Specialists are Certified Peer Support Specialists who have completed the Youth and Young Adult enhancement training program. Notably, these professionals are adults with lived experience of mental health challenges and have the potential to be lifechanging for students who are facing similar challenges.

Currently, Youth Peer Support Specialists can only work with students between the ages of 14 and 17, to the exclusion of elementary and middle school students. It is critical to include these younger-aged children, as that is when many mental health challenges are often first identified. To meet the needs of young people, Youth Peer Support Specialist services need to be expanded to provide support to *all* youth up to age 21 and have a formal endorsement tailored for youth and young adult services, rather than a mere enhancement which lacks sufficient uniformity and oversight.

3. Uniform Access to Family Peer Support Specialists

Few counties in PA have access to Family Peer Support Specialists, who are members of families with lived experience caring for a child with mental health challenges. To meet the needs of caregivers and young children with mental health challenges, Family Peer Support Specialists, who are uniquely qualified to provide support to other families, should be certified, Medicaid billable, and available in every county.

Together, these reforms will expand the workforce, reduce barriers to care, and create a more sustainable system to support Pennsylvania's children.

Join the Movement

Join **Strong Minds, Bright Futures** in advocating for the **certification** of non-clinical professionals who can provide **Tier 1 and Tier 2 services** to children in schools, communities, and homes. Together, we can expand the workforce, improve access to care, and ensure better outcomes for Pennsylvania's children.