

Behavioral Health Workforce Shortages Continue to Create Challenges for Individuals Seeking Care

New Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation report details strategies for addressing behavioral health workforce shortages, improving the affordability and accessibility of services

BOSTON, MA (December 5, 2024) – Massachusetts is at a critical crossroads, as growth in the behavioral health workforce and the talent pipeline is not keeping pace with the higher demand for services. A new report from the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation (MTF), [The Behavioral Health Workforce Challenge](#), assesses the challenges related to workforce development and retention as well as the issues of health equity and the need to make services more accessible and affordable. The report, building upon MTF's recently released [Pediatric Behavioral Health Crisis chartbook](#), details the critical connection between workforce and access to care, ongoing strategies to address the workforce shortage and bolster the talent pipeline, and recommends additional actions policymakers should consider to enhance support of the behavioral health workforce and the people they serve.

The Massachusetts behavioral health workforce encompasses a range of occupations that provide prevention, early intervention, treatment, and recovery support services in a variety of settings. Despite Massachusetts boasting the highest per capita number of behavioral health providers in the nation (45,730 in 2023), there is a widening gap in the number of individuals in need of services and those who receive treatment. Workforce challenges have significantly impacted underserved communities that report higher needs for behavioral health services. However, only 22 percent of behavioral health clinicians in Massachusetts are not white, underscoring the need to grow and diversify the workforce in healthcare settings to close the gap between need and equitable accessibility.

“Several factors have impacted behavioral health workforce trends since 2018, including increased burnout and turnover rates, fewer individuals in the talent pipeline, and significant decreases in several key behavioral health positions,” said Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation President Doug Howgate. “The behavioral health workforce in Massachusetts needs to grow faster than it has been in recent years to meet the increasing demand for care. Growing the behavioral health workforce will require striking a careful balance between supporting retention efforts and attracting new and diverse individuals.”

The effects of unprecedented turnover and burnout as well as significant pay disparities across behavioral health settings are seen in the loss of workers and high vacancy rates across the behavioral health field. Between 2017 and 2023 Mental Health and Substance Abuse Social Workers experienced a workforce decline of 1,260; Child, Family, and School Social Workers experienced a decline of 1,190; and Community Health Workers (CHWs) experienced a decline of 1,130. The number of CHWs saw the largest proportional decrease during this time, losing more

than a third of the workforce. This is especially concerning, given that community-based providers provide services to underserved communities and often serve as the training ground for a range of behavioral health occupations.

“Massachusetts continues to experience a mental health emergency among our young people. This means that their schoolwork, social development, healthcare, relationships, and future success are being compromised,” said William James College President Dr. Nicholas Covino. “Most parents cannot find an available provider to help them to care for their child. For years, we have known the need to attract and support more skilled professionals with a range of cultural and life experiences into the field. In other areas of healthcare, business, government, educational institutions, and philanthropy collaborate to create the systems of care that our families need. The same investment is required for the mental health and the future of our young people.”

Supporting behavioral health workforce programs has become a key area of focus for policymakers in Massachusetts in recent years, with over \$600 million allocated since FY2021 through initiatives like grant opportunities and the [MA Repay Program](#), which provides student loan repayment assistance for thousands of eligible workers. Additionally, policymakers continue to make new investments in workforce programs targeted at the behavioral health workforce with three programs expected to be launched by the end of the year or early next year with \$70 million in funding supported by the Behavioral Health Trust Fund.

The report also highlights behavioral health workforce efforts that occur outside the state budget and federal investments. Massachusetts healthcare providers have implemented their own programs and partnered with other organizations, like higher education institutions, to address their own behavioral health workforce needs. Initiatives include Riverside Community Care’s Emerging Leaders Program, an innovative retention program offered by Riverside Community Care to any mid-level managers within the organization centered around peer-driven professional development opportunities, and Vinfen’s MA Career Ladder Program, a 12-month training program administered by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to upskill incumbent workers who are employed with a partner healthcare employer to become a Licensed Practical Nurse.

“Riverside Community Care understands that a talented and diverse workforce is essential if we are to achieve our mission,” said Riverside President & CEO Vic DiGravio. “We are committed to programs like our Emerging Leaders Program to help with recruitment and retention, but most fundamentally, we need to be reimbursed for services at levels that allow us to pay our staff their true worth if we are to fully solve this crisis.”

“The behavioral health workforce in Massachusetts has been in steady decline in recent years, largely due to burnout, pandemic-induced strain, and other challenges,” said Vinfen Chief

People Officer Chad Cotter. “Addressing this crisis is crucial to meet the growing care needs of residents, particularly as fewer professionals are entering the field. Employers who prioritize expanding this workforce—enhancing its size, capabilities, and diversity—stand to benefit greatly from initiatives led by policymakers. By reducing educational costs, offering competitive compensation, and creating clear paths for long-term career development, we can build a robust and inclusive workforce that mirrors the communities it serves. With focused action and support, we can reverse these workforce trends and uplift these indispensable professionals.”

The Behavioral Health Workforce Challenge report details a wide range of approaches for addressing behavioral health workforce shortages and advancing health equity. Whether it is through expanding existing training capacity, creating new career pathways, or collecting workforce data, Massachusetts policymakers should consider supporting strategies like encouraging insurance participation for behavioral health providers, facilitating public-private partnerships, and reducing barriers to the field. Addressing the challenges of high vacancy rates and insufficient access for all residents requires building on what has been proven to work and developing new strategies to attract and retain the behavioral health workforce and incentivize providers to take insurance and equitably serve all populations.

About the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation

Founded in 1932, the [Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation \(MTF\)](#) is widely recognized as the state's premier public policy organization dealing with state and local fiscal, tax, and economic policies. MTF's record of high-quality research and non-partisan analysis has earned the organization broad credibility on Beacon Hill and across the Commonwealth. Our mission is to provide accurate, unbiased research with balanced, thoughtful recommendations that strengthen the state's finances and economy to foster the long-term well-being of the Commonwealth. Over the course of nine decades, MTF has played an instrumental role in achieving major reforms and promoting sound public policy in state government. In the past ten years, MTF has won sixteen prestigious national awards from the Governmental Research Association for our work on a wide array of topics. Our unique credibility has allowed us to have a significant impact on a wide range of issues - from health care, business costs and transportation funding to tax competitiveness, capital investments and state and local finances.

About Riverside Community Care

Riverside Community Care (www.riversidecc.org) makes a difference in the lives of individuals, families, and communities through innovative and compassionate behavioral healthcare and human services. A community-based non-profit organization serving more than 40,000 people a year across Massachusetts, Riverside offers a wide range of mental healthcare, early childhood and youth programs, developmental and brain injury services, addiction treatment, trauma response, and more. With 1,700 employees and an annual budget of \$135 million, Riverside has been recognized as a Top Place to Work by *The Boston Globe* for three consecutive years.

About Vinfen

Established in 1977, Vinfen is a nonprofit, health and human services organization and a leading provider of community-based services to individuals with mental health conditions, intellectual and developmental disabilities, brain injuries, and behavioral health challenges. Our services and advocacy promote the recovery, resiliency, habilitation, and self-determination of the people we serve. Vinfen's 3,400 dedicated employees are experienced, highly-trained professionals who provide a full range of supportive living, health, educational, and clinical services in 372 programs throughout Massachusetts and Connecticut.

About William James College

William James College (www.williamjames.edu) educates a range of multicultural professionals for careers in leadership and mental healthcare. It partners with community agencies to attract new professionals and to create career ladders for existing employees. Its commitment to diversity recognizes the need to increase access to care and to improve the science and practice of psychology with new viewpoints and lived experience.