

Payer–Provider Partnership to Identify Successful Retention Strategies for the Behavioral Health Workforce

Shari L. Hutchison, MS, PMP¹, Amy D. Herschell, PhD¹, Katie Clauss, MS, CPRP², Kristen Hovorka, PHR, SHRM-CP³, Deborah S. Wasilchak, MA¹, and Matthew O. Hurford, MD¹

(1) Community Care Behavioral Health Organization, UPMC Insurance Services Division; (2) UPMC Behavioral Health of the Alleghenies; (3) Salisbury Management, Inc.

What Is the Purpose of This Study?

- A managed care organization and community-based providers collaborated to gain a better understanding of workforce issues.
- The result of the collaboration was actionable steps based on merging field-tested, research-backed, and provider-perceived best strategies designed to improve staff retention.

What Is the Problem?

- Annual staff turnover rates are high, ranging from 25% to 50% in mental health agencies and 19% to 33% in substance use disorder agencies.
- High turnover rates in the behavioral health workforce are a burden and associated with:
 - Increased cost of recruiting and training new employees;
 - Increased strain on remaining employees (i.e., decreased morale);
 - Inconsistent services, weaker therapist–client relationships; and
 - Decreased access to care.

What Are the Findings?

- Sources of best strategies for retention were not always consistent.
- Successfully demonstrated but less used strategies included use of exit and stay interviews, training in best practices, availability of electronic records and other technology, and flexible work schedules.
- Seventeen percent of provider responses emphasized the type of employment offered (full or part time, benefits, competitive wage), 13% ability to offer trainings and staff development, 10% using staff feedback.
- Who Should Care Most?
 - Administrators of behavioral health services and those who facilitate quality care—payers, mental health officials, and advocates.
 - The behavioral health workforce of psychiatrists, clinicians, social workers, and others.
 - Individuals who receive behavioral health services.

Recommendations for Action

- Providers desire a vehicle for sharing ideas and problem-solving issues and should be given a routine forum for this purpose.
- Providers across systems should be given the opportunity to learn successful strategies from other providers.
- Low used, low burden and highly endorsed strategies identified by this study should be implemented by providers.