

OFMHS 2022 Behavioral Health Workforce Survey Results

Background: In an anonymous survey offered to community behavioral health organizations regarding the recruitment and retention of the behavioral health workforce in Washington state, potential respondents were asked to answer two questions: *“What do you see as the most significant challenges to recruitment and retention of the behavioral health workforce in Washington?”*, and a follow-up question, *“What strategies have you employed, or have considered using, to recruit and retain the behavioral health workforce?”* Many participants responded to the survey, providing a variety of detailed answers to these questions, though some common themes presented themselves.

Theme 1-Competitive Wages: offering competitive wages was repeatedly mentioned as being a primary challenge to recruiting and retention in 86% of survey responses. 40% of respondents listed low wages as being the sole challenge to recruiting and retention. The prevalence of this as a limiting factor to recruiting and retention suggests that this is a system wide issue.

Pursuing a career in behavioral health often requires a large financial investment into one’s education, resulting in graduating students of the field prioritizing a competitive salary when looking for work. Historic under-funding of the behavioral health system often results in challenges to offering competitive wages compared to those at major hospitals and health care agencies or within the field of private practice.

According to the respondents, the most common way of combatting low wages was to increase starting wages and offer raises to existing employees, as well as increasing benefits and offering tuition and/or training reimbursement. Additionally, 25% of respondents offered hiring bonuses and one respondent offered rural employees a \$2/hour incentive on top of the base pay scale.

Theme 2-Work-life balance/Burnout: After wages, this was the next most prominent challenge to recruiting and retention, with 40% of respondents listing some type of work-life balance challenge as being an obstacle to effective recruiting and retention. Respondents listed factors such as long and unpredictable hours, excessive caseloads, and lack of recognition and support as being the primary contributor to this. Additionally, working frequently with people with behavioral health conditions, combined with the everyday stressors of the job, as well as lack of support or recognition from both supervisors and people receiving supports, can lead to new recruits as well as long-time employees experiencing burnout, and seeking an exit from the behavioral health workforce.

Strategies offered by respondents to mitigate burnout varied. 20% of respondents offer shift flexibility, 10% said that they focused on self-care and offered mental health days, and 10% changed the hiring process, focusing on soft-skills and experience over degree qualifications.

Other Factors: While low wages and an undesirable work-life balance were the two most commonly cited challenges facing recruitment and retention of the behavioral health workforce in Washington, there were a few other factors that respondents listed. Some respondents listed the COVID-19 public health emergency as being a significant challenge and credited the emergency with causing potential and previous hires to want to work remotely. Respondents also said that finding qualified applicants was difficult, while others cited a lack of providers.

Next Steps: These results have informed the work of the [OFMHS Workforce Development team](#) over the past couple of years in supporting recruitment and retention efforts in the behavioral health workforce. The team has provided trainings on trauma informed care, self-care, and managing burnout and facilitated group discussions on recruitment and retention challenges and strategies. We have also increased engagement with statewide partners and created a career support section on our [Workforce Development website](#) to assist job seekers. As we continue this work, we will be re-issuing the survey in 2024 to identify current challenges and strategies, and to analyze and interpret results as compared with recent changes within the field of behavioral health (legislation, policy, environmental changes).