



BHWC
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
WORKFORCE CENTER

Strategic Plan FY26-FY28

SUMMARY

Established by the 2021 Health Care and Human Services Reform Act, the BHWC operates through a hub-and-spoke model led by Southern Illinois University School of Medicine (SIU) and the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC). In partnership with state agencies, academic institutions, and providers, the BHWC leads initiatives in workforce planning, training, and retention to ensure equitable access to quality behavioral health services.

The Illinois Behavioral Health Workforce Center (BHWC) Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2026 through 2028 lays out a bold and collaborative vision to expand, diversify, and strengthen the state's behavioral health workforce. Amid rising demand for mental health and substance use services, Illinois continues to face critical shortages in behavioral health professionals across all regions—particularly in rural and underserved areas. Only 22% of mental health needs and 20% of substance use needs are currently being met in Illinois. Over one-third of adults with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders have not received treatment; thus the urgent need for transformative action.¹

VISION

Illinois's behavioral health workforce will have the capacity and skills to meet the needs of all state residents.

MISSION

The BHWC will increase access to effective behavioral health services through coordinated initiatives to recruit, educate, and retain behavioral health professionals.

PRIORITIES

In 3–5 years, the BHWC will have leveraged its subject matter expertise and collaborative partnerships to contribute to:

- **Enhancing access** to a diverse, prepared, and robust behavioral health workforce
- Developing **clear, accessible, and expanded career pathways** for behavioral health utilizing existing career pathways for health professions as well as pathways specific to behavioral health
- Providing **effective and accessible clinical training** and professional development
- **Reducing administrative burden** and **recommending policy improvements** for behavioral health workers
- Ensuring **adequate and substantial supports** and reimbursement rates for behavioral health services and providers
- Tracking Illinois behavioral health **workforce data and trends**

GOALS & OBJECTIVES



1. Strengthen and expand behavioral health curriculum and clinical training experiences.

Objective 1: Reduce the identified skill gaps in the workforce

Objective 2: Increase the number of clinical placements in rural and underserved regions

Objective 3: Increase the number of Illinois students who stay in the state for post-graduate residency and internship training



2. Strengthen educational advancement across systems.

Objective 1: Increase the number of students pursuing a degree in behavioral health programming

Objective 2: Address recruitment and retention of underrepresented candidates across professions



3. Build and utilize evidence to develop policy recommendations.

Objective 1: Utilize data to drive policy

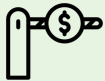
Objective 2: Provide data to support the state's investment in increasing the behavioral health workforce



4. Strengthen pre-career programs and awareness.

Objective 1: Increase awareness of behavioral health careers

Objective 2: Increase participation in behavioral health-focused career pathways



5. Address financial barriers to behavioral health education and workforce entry.

Objective 1: Reduce student loan burden for students graduating from behavioral health education and training programs



6. Support and retain the incumbent workforce in providing high quality care.

Objective 1: Increase capacity to promote effective behavioral health services in high-need areas shown to have significant training gaps

Objective 2: Support retention of behavioral health providers through targeted programs

Objective 3: Implement a framework for a culturally responsive behavioral health workforce

Objective 4: Support primary care providers in the delivery of behavioral health services

The plan recognizes that BHWC alone cannot resolve the workforce crisis. Its success depends on strong, ongoing collaboration with state agencies, community providers, higher education, and advocacy organizations. The BHWC will serve as a convener, capacity builder, data repository, and strategic driver—aligned around the vision that all Illinois residents have access to a behavioral health workforce that reflects their communities and meets their needs.