The definition of crisis workforce is a national group of employees, volunteers, peer specialists with lived expertise, and any professional who supports people with a behavioral health crisis or any type of emotional distress.
The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Action Alliance) is the public-private partnership working to advance the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and to make suicide prevention a national priority. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), through the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) grant, provides funding to the Education Development Center (EDC) to operate and manage the Secretariat for the Action Alliance. Launched in 2010, the Action Alliance is funded through both public and private support.

Universal Health Services, Inc. (UHS), is one of the nation’s largest and most respected providers of health care services. UHS is dedicated to changing the national narrative about suicide in a manner that promotes hope, resiliency, connectedness, and recovery.

Education Development Center (EDC) is a global nonprofit that advances lasting solutions to improve education, promote health, and expand economic opportunity. Since 1958, EDC has been a leader in designing, implementing, and evaluating powerful and innovative programs in more than 80 countries around the world.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Action Alliance), with generous support from Universal Health Services, Inc. (UHS), and private and public leadership from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), convened the Crisis Workforce Task Force (Task Force), comprising national public- and private-sector leaders with expertise in issues affecting the crisis workforce. No official endorsement from UHS for the information in this paper is intended or should be inferred.

The Action Alliance conducted interviews with key public and private entities to identify challenges facing the crisis workforce, as well as strategies used by employers in hiring and supporting these vital workers. Findings from the interviews were presented to the Task Force, which then formalized three primary goals:

1. RECRUIT the crisis workforce,
2. RETAIN the crisis workforce, and
3. SUPPORT the crisis workforce.

To meet the three goals, the Task Force developed 10 specific recommendations, which include concrete action steps for achieving the proposed strategies. These recommendations serve as the basis for this national road map, to be distributed nationally to organizations and institutions seeking to support the crisis workforce.

The work of this Task Force advances Goals 9 and 14 of the 2024 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goal 9: Improve the quality and accessibility of crisis care services across all communities, and Goal 14: Create an equitable and diverse suicide prevention workforce that is equipped and supported to address the needs of the communities they serve.
The 2024 *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (National Strategy)* sets a comprehensive public health approach for suicide prevention across national, state, tribal, territorial, and community levels. Within this comprehensive approach are key elements for health care organizations, government entities, academic institutions, and communities to contribute to the development, implementation, and evaluation of suicide prevention, crisis intervention, evidence-informed treatment, and postvention programs, policies, and practices. A robust, supported, and diverse workforce is essential to meet the goals and objectives laid out in the lifesaving crisis intervention services and infrastructure outlined in the *National Strategy*.

**How can we, as a nation, best recruit, retain, and support this vital workforce?**

This question was the subject of exploration by the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Action Alliance).

With support and funding from UHS, the Action Alliance convened the *Crisis Workforce Task Force* (Task Force) made up of national public- and private-sector leaders with expertise in issues affecting the crisis workforce.

Working against the backdrop of the waning COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to the national 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, the Action Alliance conducted interviews with key public and private leaders to learn what issues the crisis workforce has faced thus far, as well as what strategies employers have used to recruit, retain, and support their crisis workforce, with a focus on successful recommendations from those doing work in the field. Armed with this information, as well as a thorough review of the literature, Task Force members first developed three overarching goals, then created 10 specific recommendations along with 34 concrete action steps for improvement.

These recommendations are included in this road map to support state and national systems-level leaders striving to achieve the goals of recruiting, retaining, and supporting a diverse crisis workforce.
Recruiting the Crisis Workforce

Recruitment involves efforts to increase the number of people in the crisis workforce by expanding pathways by which people can enter the crisis workforce, as well as creating positions, both traditional and nontraditional, in order to be more representative of the population being served. Additionally, recruitment involves filling current vacancies at the organizational level.
RECOMMENDATION 1

Use a shared, consistent definition of crisis workforce to ensure unified language across the field.

The definition of crisis workforce is a national group of employees, volunteers, peer specialists with lived expertise, and any professional who supports people with a behavioral health crisis or any type of emotional distress.

The crisis workforce is embedded within intersecting systems, including mobile response, community supports, crisis contact centers, and crisis stabilization spaces.

**Action Step**

This definition and framework around crisis workforce should be incorporated into updated national crisis guidelines and proposed model service definitions and standards.
RECOMMENDATION 2

Implement innovative recruitment strategies, including partnerships with community organizations, secondary education institutes, colleges, and universities.

Action Step

The U.S. Department of Education, higher education institutions, and leading behavioral health organizations, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the National Association for Social Workers (NASW), the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American Psychological Association (APA), the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, and minority-serving professional organizations, should create and/or implement scholarship programs to increase opportunities for crisis workforce professionals.

Action Step

The National Association of Peer Supporters (NAPS), the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD), Mental Health America (MHA), NAMI, and the U.S. Department of Labor should develop and implement practicum and internship programs that focus on peers and other types of non-licensed crisis workers to increase their opportunities to obtain credentials.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Advocate for loan forgiveness for workers in the crisis workforce.

Action Step

Work with leading private and public organizations, including the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) National Health Service Corps, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Labor’s Apprenticeship Program, to determine whether existing loan forgiveness programs include the crisis workforce. Determine who qualifies under each program and who does not to ensure employers implement loan forgiveness programs for crisis workforce employees across the continuum of care.
RECOMMENDATION 4

Develop advertisements and public awareness messaging about opportunities to work within the crisis workforce.

Action Step
Create a national campaign highlighting the role of the crisis workforce, including public service announcements that emphasize the opportunities to make a positive difference as a crisis worker. Disseminate the campaign via the SAMHSA 988 Office, NASMHPD, the Ad Council or another agency with national presence and experience in this type of campaign, Vibrant Emotional Health, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to ensure reach to crisis workforce systems leaders.

Action Step
Reference and make use of the Framework for Successful Messaging as well as the 988 Formative Research Messaging Framework in creating a national campaign.

Action Step
Leverage the Action Alliance Messaging Work Group to disseminate crisis workforce messaging toolkits and engage Action Alliance Executive Committee members to push out the campaign within their sectors.

Action Step
Utilize social media and nontraditional dissemination methods to reach specific communities by referencing “Strategies for Effective Communication in Diverse Communities” and “Effective Messaging Strategies: A Review of the Evidence.”

Action Step
Partner with trusted community leaders, such as local public safety organizations and faith communities; educate state legislatures on the economic and workforce benefits of enacting laws that support state loan forgiveness programs; and use trusted platforms within the community, such as social media community groups and community newsletters, to amplify opportunities that are available to their respective communities. Together, these actions will increase the awareness of, and reduce the stigma around, the opportunity to work for and/or utilize 988.¹
RECOMMENDATION 5
Disseminate federal programs and grant opportunities to clinicians to increase placements in crisis work settings.

Action Step
Review the American Counseling Association “Federal Grants for Counseling” guide to explore opportunities to access and utilize available funding.

Federal Grant Opportunities for Counseling
- The Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training Program
- The Mental and Behavioral Health Education and Training Program
- Federal Telehealth Programs
- The Certified Community Behavioral Health Centers Program
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative

Explore opportunities to access and utilize available funding.
Retaining the Crisis Workforce

Retention of the crisis workforce is defined as reduction in turnover; robust employee engagement, support, and well-being; and opportunities for career growth to support longevity and professional development.
RECOMMENDATION 6
Develop equitable career growth pathways and opportunities for the crisis workforce.

Action Step
Reference and utilize the National Association of Peer Supporters (NAPS) National Practice Guidelines, developed in partnership with SAMHSA. These guidelines, updated in 2019, provide guidance to supervisors in “upholding the values of peer support” and are anchored in feedback from across the country.

Action Step
Embed transparent information on available career paths, promotional processes, and opportunities into hiring and onboarding processes, policies, and procedures as well as making this information regularly accessible to existing staff. Ensure that opportunities for promotion and pathways to management positions are communicated to employees at time of hire. Build this communication directly into hiring and onboarding processes, policies, and procedures.

Action Step
Utilize the Alignment for Progress: A National Strategy for Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders for policy guidance around ensuring diverse workforces. Guidance addresses improving Medicare coverage of peer support specialists, developing culturally competent guidelines for providers, ensuring hospital compliance with the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act, providing technical assistance for care integration, establishing a national consultation line, and requiring adoption of the National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) Standards in health and health care settings.

Action Step
SAMHSA and NASMHPD should examine opportunities to embed lived experience in the hiring life cycle, from job creation through the hiring and onboarding process.
RECOMMENDATION 7
Create, implement, and evaluate robust training—including resiliency training, supervision, and mentoring practices for crisis positions.

Action Step
SAMHSA is to identify the core competencies required to work effectively in the crisis continuum and to include them in a formal document that will be used nationally, both in job postings and in the onboarding process for new hires. These competencies should be built upon the existing National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care: Best Practice Toolkit, released by SAMHSA in 2020.

Action Step
At the individual organization level, ensure that policies reflect employee expectations in terms of training and supervision.

Action Step
Offer student loan forgiveness to practitioners who agree to mentor crisis workers and ensure adequate funding is in place to support a practitioner’s time to train and/or mentor students.

Ensure that policies reflect employee expectations in terms of training and supervision.
RECOMMENDATION 8
Invest to ensure fair compensation packages, with incentive structures, benefits, and workplace flexibility.

→ Action Step
Review and utilize HRSA’s Health Workforce program initiative fact sheet, which outlines historic investments made by the Biden-Harris Administration in support of the crisis workforce.

→ Action Step
Expand interstate compacts so licensed mental health providers can operate across state lines. One example for reference is PSYPACT.

→ Action Step
Utilize the Alignment for Progress: A National Strategy for Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders for policy guidance to improve Medicare coverage of peer support specialists.

→ Action Step
Encourage employee choice in workplace location—in-person, remote, or hybrid—and implement scheduling alternatives to ensure work-life balance, flexibility, and respite from the intensity of crisis-response work, where and when possible. (See the University of Chicago’s Human Resources document “Alternative Work Arrangements” and Transform 911’s “Advancing the Workforce.”)

→ Action Step
Develop sustainable federal and state funding streams to ensure continuity of hiring and supporting workforce infrastructure. Additionally, work with the Center for Medicaid Services (CMS) on reimbursements for nontraditional positions.

→ Action Step
Create professional development processes that provide regular (at least annual) performance reviews and feedback to support staff growth.
Supporting the crisis workforce means ensuring a financially viable and stable workforce to create safer communities. It involves acknowledging the stress of crisis work and ensuring that workplace environments prioritize employee well-being.
RECOMMENDATION 9
Enable a culture of employee well-being by establishing an in-house wellness program that includes peer support, employee resource groups on mental health and well-being, ongoing education on mental health and well-being, and inclusion of behavioral health referral resources to culturally competent mental health support.

Action Step
Work with human resources departments in public and private organizations to develop this programming, making use of available human and financial resources.

Action Step
Leaders should express authenticity and openness in pursuit of a culture of transparency, candor, and reduction of stigma associated with mental health stressors, particularly within the crisis workforce. (See Mind Share Partners, “Leaders Go First.”)

Action Step
Employees should conduct an equity review of pay across the organization to address any systemic bias and discrimination that may have resulted in pay inequities and then rectify.

Action Step
Review the action steps and opportunities outlined by the Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation.

“The Foundation’s mission is to reduce burnout of health care professionals and safeguard their well-being and job satisfaction. We envision a world where seeking mental health services is universally viewed as a sign of strength for health care professionals.

“The Foundation has three main bodies of work targeted at making a long-standing impact on this issue:

1. Advising the health care industry to implement well-being initiatives
2. Building awareness of these issues to reduce the stigma
3. Funding research and programs that will reduce health care professional burnout and improve provider well-being”
RECOMMENDATION 10
Ensure communities are reflected in the crisis workforce that supports them.

Action Step
SAMHSA and NASMHPD will collaborate on the development of a community assessment toolkit to assist with the identification of community leaders. This will ensure that specific communities are reflected in the workforce supporting them and that community trust is built along with local crisis workforce efforts.

Action Step
Organizations should be intentional about creating leadership pathways that prioritize diversity and include individuals from historically marginalized communities.

Action Step
Organization executives should reach out to the community leaders identified through the community assessment to establish relationships and share resources.

Action Step
Federal, state, and local governments should establish tax incentives for organizations whose employee base and management team proportionately reflect the communities they serve.

Be intentional about creating leadership pathways that prioritize diversity.
The Task Force emphasis on actionable recommendations, if implemented, will enable great improvement in the recruitment, retention, and support of the crisis workforce in the United States.

The recommendations and action steps outlined in this road map reflect the broad experience and wide-ranging perspectives of the Action Alliance Crisis Workforce Task Force partners, as well as key points gathered from national experts, publications, reports, and other sourced materials.


3 Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes’ Foundation. (n.d.). About the foundation. https://drlornabreen.org/about-the-foundation/
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