

Sustaining the Crisis Workforce

A NATIONAL ROAD MAP



RECRUIT



RETAIN



SUPPORT

krīsəs /wərk fôrs/

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

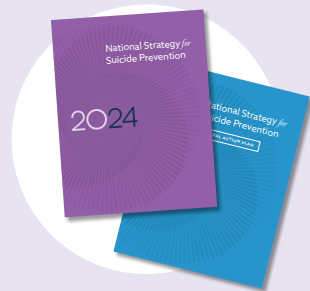


In 2023, the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Action Alliance), with generous support from Universal Health Services, Inc. (UHS), and private and public leadership from the **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention** (AFSP) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (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.

INTRODUCTION



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.





Recruiting the Crisis Workforce



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.

The Crisis Care Continuum



2024 *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention*



Recruiting the Crisis Workforce



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.

→ Action Step

Reference, leverage, and disseminate ***Building New Horizons***, a peer hiring guide. The guide is broken into three modules—Pre-Hiring, Hiring, and Post-Hiring and is aligned with this road map’s effort for effective recruitment, retention, and support of peers working in the crisis workforce.



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.



Recruiting the Crisis Workforce



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



Recruiting the Crisis Workforce



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.

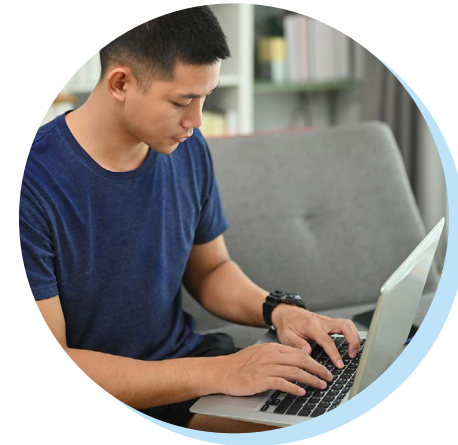
Federal Grant Opportunities for Counseling

- [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.

→ Action Step

Review the U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education’s **Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program**, which offers competitive grants for projects that support and demonstrate innovative partnerships to train school-based mental health service providers for employment in local educational agencies (LEAs).



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”² 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

Create and foster a workplace culture of professional development and opportunity by instituting professional development trajectories; conducting regular check-ins with staff, both individually and as a team; and providing resources for continuing education opportunities for all employees, regardless of licensure status.

→ 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.



Retaining the Crisis Workforce



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.





Retaining the Crisis Workforce



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 [PSYFACT](#).

→ 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

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”³



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

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

→ Action Step

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

→ 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.



ENDNOTES



- ¹ Velazquez, T. (2023, May 23). *Most U.S. adults remain unaware of 988 suicide and crisis lifeline*. Pew. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/05/23/most-us-adults-remain-unaware-of-988-suicide-and-crisis-lifeline>
- ² National Association of Peer Supporters. (n.d.). National practice guidelines. <https://www.peersupportworks.org/national-practice-guidelines>
- ³ Dr. Lorna Breen Heroes' Foundation. (n.d.). About the foundation. <https://drlornabreen.org/about-the-foundation/>

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Senior Advisor & Funder

Karen Johnson, Senior Vice President, Chief Clinical Officer, Behavioral Health Division, Universal Health Services, Inc. (UHS)

Public Co-Lead

John Palmieri, Deputy Director, 988 and Behavioral Health Crisis Coordinating Office, SAMHSA

Private Co-Lead

Laurel Stine, Executive Vice President and Chief Policy Officer, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

Members

Greg Alberico, Vice President National Call Center, Universal Health Services, Inc. (UHS)

Vic Armstrong, Vice President for Health Equity and Engagement, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

Elisa Arespachaga, Vice President, Clinical Affairs & Workforce, American Hospital Association (AHA)

Jackson Beck, Senior Program Associate, Redefining Public Safety initiative, Vera Institute of Justice

Otto Drozd III, Executive Secretary, National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)

Wendy Morris, Senior Behavioral Health Advisor, National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD)

Stacey Paul, Project Director, Joint Commission

Katherine Polanco, Director of Workforce Management, Vibrant Emotional Health

Brie Reimann, Vice President, Practice Improvement and Consulting, National Council on Mental Well-Being

Shannon Scully, Director, Justice Policy & Initiatives, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Billina Shaw, Senior Medical Advisor, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Becky Stoll, Senior Vice President, Crisis Services, Centerstone

The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Project Team

Dana Careless, Director of Operations and Strategy

T. J. Kennedy, Research Associate

Chuck Klevgaard, Taskforce Lead

Karen Solis, Operations and Strategy Manager

Ksenia Zolot, Administrative Coordinator

If you have questions or comments or wish to discuss this report in greater detail, please contact [Dana Careless at dcareless@edc.org](mailto:dcareless@edc.org).