****

**The Importance of Increasing the Number of**

**Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioners (*Psych NPs*) in Virginia**

Access to behavioral health services is a top critical service gap identified in recent Community Health Needs Assessments conducted by Virginia’s nonprofit hospitals. It is also their top implementation strategy priority. Unfortunately, while the need for behavioral health services is great, there is a tremendous shortage of behavioral health professionals in the Commonwealth. Nearly 3/4 of Virginia localities are federally designated behavioral health professional shortage areas.

To make matters worse, significant numbers of today’s behavioral health professionals are nearing retirement. Nearly 2/3 of Psych NPs and Psychiatrists nationwide are age 50 or older. These are the only behavioral health professionals specially trained and licensed to prescribe and manage psychotropic medications, a critical treatment component for many mental health conditions. The small number of Psych NPs is particularly compelling. There are only 213 Psych NPs practicing in Virginia; 71 localities (*53%*) don’t have any.

The map below shows they are concentrated in Northern Virginia, Richmond and Hampton Roads, with other pockets where Virginia’s Psych NP training programs are located (*Charlottesville, Radford, Winchester*). Only 13 localities have more than 5 Psych NPs.



Developed by Community Health Solutions for the Virginia Health Care Foundation using license data

from the Virginia Department of Health Professions (*June 2017*)

In addition to their pharmacological knowledge and prescriptive authority, Psych NPs who started as NPs are very valuable in this new era of integrating the delivery of behavioral health services with primary medical care. Their training as both medical and behavioral health providers make them ideal for helping bridge the many cultural differences between medical and behavioral health professionals.

There are employment opportunities in all sectors (*primary care medical practices, university counseling centers, hospitals, Veterans’ Administration, substance abuse programs, public mental health agencies, residential treatment*) and in all areas of the state. In early March 2018, there were 55 Psych NP job postings in Virginia on Indeed.com (*up from 35 in August*). In the last 2 years, the average salary for Psych NP jobs in Virginia posted on Indeed.com was $127,189.

Increasing the number of Psych NPs practicing in Virginia is a smart, efficient and cost-effective approach to help address the shortage of behavioral health professionals. It only takes existing NPs 15 – 24 months to earn their post-master’s Psych NP Certificate, while maintaining employment. (*The education requirements for producing other behavioral health professionals range from three to six years*.)

Virginia is fortunate to have 5 established Psych NP programs, with 2 additional programs planning to start training students in January 2019. Five Schools of Nursing (*SON*) offer post-master’s Certificate programs, three offer a “traditional” Master of Science in Nursing program with a Psych NP emphasis and one will offer a post- master’s Certificate program nested in a Doctor of Nursing Practice program starting in 2019.

**Virginia Health Care Foundation’s Interest in Psych NPs**

The Virginia Health Care Foundation (*VHCF*) is a public/private partnership founded in 1992. VHCF uses a multi-faceted approach to fulfill its mission of increasing access to primary health care for uninsured and medically underserved Virginians. One area of focus is health workforce development. VHCF discovered the tremendous shortage of Psych NPs in 2010, and has undertaken several initiatives to increase the number of Psych NPs practicing in Virginia, as a result. It provides multi-year grants to free clinics, Federally Qualified Health Centers and other similar organizations to hire Psych NPs.

In 2014, VHCF created a Psych NP scholarship program, which underwrites full tuition and all required fees for Nurse Practitioners who earn their post-master’s Psych NP Certificate at any accredited school of nursing. In return, scholarship recipients must work as a Psych NP for 2 years at a Virginia health safety net organization after graduating.

For more information about the scholarship, please contact Denise Daly Konrad (dkonrad@vhcf.org or 804.828.5867).