



PSYCH NPS IMPROVE ACCESS TO BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR VIRGINIANS

We are in dire need of behavioral health providers in my community. As a primary care provider, I found myself providing mental health services on a temporary basis and referring patients to other organizations for mental health services – often only for a patient to meet roadblock after roadblock. It was frustrating as a provider and scary for the patient. This is why I became a Psych NP.

- **Erin Morris, RN, FNP-BC, PMHNP-BC**

Want to help your patients with behavioral health (BH) needs, yet don't feel equipped? Consider becoming a Psych NP via a post-Master's Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner Certificate Program.

In 12 – 24 months, Psych NP Certificate students:

- Gain expertise in psychotropic medication management
- Learn strategies to engage with clients who have behavior health conditions
- Build therapeutic and communication skills
- Learn the neurologic basis for behaviors and behavioral health conditions

Year-after-year, inadequate access to BH services is the most frequently cited critical service gap in Community Health Needs Assessments conducted by nonprofit hospitals throughout Virginia. More than 2/3 of the state's localities are federally-designated mental health professional shortage areas. Problems finding mental health professionals are pervasive, however, and occur in every part of the Commonwealth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the need and increased demand. The Kaiser Family Foundation reports an average of 37% of Virginians reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression during the COVID-19 pandemic (3.7 times more than in 2019).

Psych NPs can help meet this critical need, but there are only 217 in Virginia. The current demand is great. There are more than 100 Psych NP job postings in Virginia on Indeed.com in June 2021. This need for psych NPs will only grow, since 60% of Virginia's existing Psych NPs are age 50 or older.

Psych NPs and psychiatrists are the only BH professionals trained and licensed to prescribe and manage psychotropic medicines. Psych NPs with medical NP practice experience are particularly valuable as integration of behavioral health services with primary care takes hold. Trained as both medical and behavioral providers, these Psych NPs can help bridge the cultural differences between medicine and behavioral health. They are sought after and highly valued by patients and providers alike.

There are six post-Master's Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner Certificate Programs in the Commonwealth (George Mason University, Liberty University, Radford University, Shenandoah University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and University of Virginia). In addition, Old Dominion University's Doctorate of Nursing Practice program has a psychiatric concentration.

Interested in becoming a Psych NP? The Virginia Health Care Foundation (VHCF) can help. The Foundation offers full-scholarships covering tuition and fees for NPs to earn a post-Master's Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner Certificate. After obtaining a Certificate, scholarship recipients must work for two years as a Psych NP in a nonprofit or public organization serving uninsured and/or medically underserved Virginians.

For more information about the scholarship or to participate in VCHCF's efforts to increase the number of Psych NPs in Virginia, please contact the Foundation (PsychNP@vhcf.org).