

Week of the Nurse Specialty Insert
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A Caring Connection

Carly DiMeglio uses her expertise to help people navigate the path from vulnerability to vitality.



THOMAS CULLEN
Week of the Nurse Writer

Treating psychological and behavioral ailments requires a heavy dose of expertise and no shortage of nuance. Psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners (Psych NPs) are essential in the fight against mental illness and substance abuse. Despite the value of Psych NPs, they are a rare breed. "There are only 213 Psych NPs practicing in Virginia; 71 localities (53 percent) don't have any," said a report from the Virginia Health Care Foundation, which used Virginia Department of Health Professions data from June 2017. That's a significant shortfall, and, because mental-health and substance-abuse problems do not discriminate, it's a gap that matters to everyone.

Carly DiMeglio is a practicing Psych NP at Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at the University of Richmond, and the story of how she ended up there illustrates not only the diversity of the opportunities her education has afforded her but also the value of people in her line of work.

Originally from Fairfax Station, Va., DiMeglio's earliest attraction to nursing came in high school when she worked part-time at a doctor's office. "During my time at that job, one of the nurses in the practice was going back to school to become a nurse practitioner," DiMeglio said via email. "I loved that she had built an incredible career working in various medical settings and specialties and was now able to advance her education to become an NP [nurse practitioner]." DiMeglio said she remembers hoping that nursing would allow her to quench her thirst for varied work helping others and also allow her to have a family of her own.

Once that fuse for nursing was lit, DiMeglio ran with the spark and obtained her bachelor's degree in nursing from U.Va. Her first post-grad job was in Arlington working on an inpatient psychiatric and addiction-services unit. "It was an incredible experience that allowed me to learn in depth about all the various psychiatric and substance use disorders and various treatment modalities," she said. Her time in Arlington spurred her to earn her master's in nursing from The Catholic University of America in 2005.

Next, DiMeglio moved to Massachusetts, worked for a health system to enhance depression screening in the community there and also worked directly with patients at three primary-care clinics. Over the next few years, she achieved the necessary educational and certification milestones to become a Psych NP and, in 2011, came back to Virginia to teach at the VCU School of Nursing in both the undergraduate and Psych NP programs. From there, she segued into working in the clinic at CAPS. Today, she works part-time there and evaluates incoming patients, makes treatment recommendations and prescribes medication when necessary.

"I was drawn to CAPS because I love working with adolescents and young adults; it's such a pivotal time in their development and yet is also the time when most psychiatric disorders manifest," DiMeglio said. "I feel it is so important that their first interaction with mental health care is high-quality, evidenced-based, patient-centered and, most of all, compassionate."

DiMeglio is well-equipped to help her patients, and she's aware of the weight of her position.

"The best part of my job is connecting with people at a very vulnerable time in their lives," she said. "It's an incredible honor to be trusted and respected by the clients I treat. At times, my role can be intense and emotionally draining, but, for every hard moment, I have more that are filled with humor and joy. I learn something new every day and watch the amazing young adults I treat grow and mature as they matriculate through college."

The rewards of nursing are evident in DiMeglio's words, and she even shared some personality traits that might help aspiring Psych NPs launch a successful career.

"I think first and foremost you have to have strong interpersonal skills," she said. "You have to be able to connect with all kinds of people in a way that is genuine and authentic. You must be non-judgmental [and] flexible in your thinking but also able to set clear boundaries when needed."

The shortage of Psych NPs doesn't reflect the value of the specialty. Rather, it presents an opportunity for people to join a valuable profession and do meaningful work.

"I would encourage people to consider all of the varied settings that PMHNPs can work in," DiMeglio



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said. "The role is no longer limited to inpatient settings, and, with the movement to better integrate primary and mental health care, the opportunities are going to only grow."

That's an encouraging note. Even more encouraging for prospective Psych NPs is the balance DiMeglio has been able to create.

She obviously values her career, but she achieved her other goal too: having a family of her own. In her free time, she spends time traveling, cooking and staying active with her husband and two kids, Luca and Emma Flynn. DiMeglio has been able to grow meaningful connections at the office and at home.

Ultimately, that is success at its most pure.

Virginia Health Care Foundation

Psychiatric NPs offer value, expertise and versatility



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The work of any nurse is complex, requires patience and demands skill. For psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners (Psych NPs), the work can include shepherding a patient from distress toward improvement, prescribing medication to ease a patient's mind or listening to a patient's concerns. Psych NPs bring special training and unique expertise to patient care. In return, Psych NPs can reap substantial rewards. And Virginia needs Psych NPs now more than ever.

Keeping a steady supply of mental health professionals in the community is essential. But the numbers aren't where they need to be. According to the Virginia Department of Health, in 2016, 77 percent of Virginia localities were federally designated as mental-health professional shortage areas, and about 40 percent of Virginians lived in these areas. The numbers haven't budged. Translation: A good chunk of Virginians do not have readily available mental health professionals. That's an extra obstacle in an already difficult situation.

Enter Psych NPs. These valuable professionals can help bridge the chasm and get people the care they need. It only takes existing nurse practitioners 15 to 24 months to earn the necessary certification to become a Psych NP, and most do so while working.



DENNIS MCWATERS FOR THE VIRGINIA HEALTH CARE FOUNDATION
Marlene Adams, PMHNP

Once certified, a Psych NP can expect to be in demand and work toward a salary north of \$100,000 based upon recent postings for Psych NP positions on the job site Indeed.com.

Although Psych NPs represent a relatively new field of advanced-practice nursing, there is considerable reward to be had from a personal and professional perspective. Psych NPs help people by giving them tools to understand the condition or issue that limits their potential and teaching strategies that work to address their personal challenges. The field offers significant demand for qualified nurses and exciting earning potential.

If this type of fulfilling work stirs something inside of you, becoming a Psych NP is worth a look.

VCU School of Nursing

Educating PMHNPs to meet Virginia's behavioral health needs

VCU School of Nursing is committed to addressing the behavioral health needs of Virginians, since much of the state is designated as a mental health professions shortage area. In addition, the opioid crisis has further increased the need for experts in behavioral health.

To address these needs, VCU offers a master's degree that prepares registered nurses for advanced practice as psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioners (PMHNPs). This program prepares nurses with knowledge and skills in areas of mental health promotion, mental illness prevention, assessment, diagnosis, treatment and patient education in the care of individuals across the lifespan. Students experience a unique balance of neuroscience, psychological theory and evidence-based practice. Students crystallize their understanding of this content through the use of simulation, interactive case study, individual and group-based projects, testing



Dawn Goldstein, Ph.D., RN, PMHNP-BC, CCM, teaches in VCU's PMHNP program and maintains an active practice as a psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner.

and supervised practicum experiences with expert and licensed mental health providers. They receive focused instruction in both psychotherapy and psychopharmacotherapy.

PMHNPs are prepared to assess, diagnose, treat and educate individuals, families and groups with complex psychiatric-mental health problems and do so with an interprofessional lens of quality and safety. These nurse practitioners work in clinical settings that include private, state or Veterans Affairs inpatient or outpatient psychiatric facilities, private psychiatric practices, and community mental health centers. PMHNPs also provide services in settings such as correctional facilities, domestic violence shelters, residential substance abuse facilities, schools and free clinics.

The master's PMHNP program is completed in two years (five semesters) of full-time study or three years (eight semesters) of part-time study. VCU also offers a post-master's certificate option for nurse practitioners or clinical nurse specialists who are prepared in another practice area, but wish to expand their practice. Our expert

faculty are master's and doctorally prepared and certificated PMHNPs who maintain a clinical practice. Students enjoy a rich precepted experience with a variety of health care providers, including NPs, physicians and other behavioral health specialists. Graduates sit for the PMHNP board certification examination administered by the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

Ranked No. 41 among the nation's graduate nursing schools by U.S. News and World Report, VCU School of Nursing educates nurses from entry-level practice through the doctorate. With a tradition of 125 years of nursing excellence, our school is committed to shaping the future of nursing through the power of education, discovery and collaboration. Apply today at www.nursing.vcu.edu or call us at (804) 828-5171.

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The Virginia Health Care Foundation offers full-time scholarships for nurse practitioners wishing to earn a post-masters Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner certificate.

Interested? Go to www.vhcf.org or send a note to PsychNP@vhcf.org



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