



# BHECN

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH  
EDUCATION CENTER  
OF NEBRASKA



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## LEGISLATIVE REPORT



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**“ At BHECN, we believe that connection is not just a value — it is the foundation of our work. ”**

## The Power of Connection in Behavioral Health



**Marley Doyle, MD**  
BHECN Director

Behavioral health conditions are uniquely isolating. They can sever our ties to emotions, to our sense of self, to others, and even to reality. As behavioral health providers, we often find ourselves absorbing this disconnection — carrying the emotional weight of our patients’ experiences while navigating the challenges of our own professional isolation.

I experienced this firsthand during my first year of practice. Working in an outpatient setting, I often ended my day having spoken only to patients. The nature of our work — deeply personal, often painful, and bound by confidentiality — made it difficult to share with friends or family. I was fortunate to find a peer support group, but that connection was something I had to seek out on my own. There was no system in place to ensure I didn’t feel alone.

At the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska (BHECN), we believe that connection is not just a value — it is the foundation of our work and of the Nebraska Model — the comprehensive system we use to help carry out our mission of growing Nebraska’s behavioral health workforce.

Our work is about people. It’s about relationships. And we believe that by fostering connection — among providers, across institutions, and throughout the behavioral health system — we can amplify our collective voice and create a stronger, more resilient future for Nebraska.

In the ensuing pages of this report, we explore how the six components of the Nebraska Model connect students to

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careers in behavioral health, trainees with opportunities to gain licensure, professionals to resources that help them thrive in the careers, policymakers and state leaders with data that helps inform sound behavioral health policies, and the community at large with a stronger, more prepared behavioral health workforce.

Many of the initiatives and programs discussed in this report have emerged over the past two years and are the result of the

Legislature’s 2022 decision to increase our budget and prioritize strengthening our state’s behavioral health workforce.

It is a privilege to do the work we do at BHECN and to have the opportunity to showcase it in this publication. We hope you will enjoy learning how your support of BHECN helps strengthen our behavioral health workforce, which improves the lives of so many who call our great state home.



# Career Awareness Connecting Nebraskans with Behavioral Health Careers

As they reach their sophomore and junior years, many college students begin making real decisions about which career paths they want to pursue.

A BHECN-supported program at the Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) aims to meet students at that crossroads and help them discover the diverse possibilities that exist within behavioral health careers.

Launched in 2021, the initiative pairs undergraduate psychology students from the University of Nebraska Omaha — primarily sophomores and juniors — with MMI’s graduate-level trainees and postdoctoral fellows. The program exposes undergraduates to real-world behavioral health careers while helping doctoral interns and fellows build supervision skills.

“It’s such a nice package,” said Melissa Hunter, PhD, assistant professor in the MMI Department of Psychology. “We’re making sure that undergrads are benefiting, our graduate and post-grad level trainees are benefiting, and our staff benefit from meaningful support. Everybody wins.”



**Melissa Hunter, PhD**  
Assistant Professor,  
Munroe-Meyer Institute  
Department of Psychology

Since its start, the program has placed between 12 and 15 undergraduates, most of whom go on to pursue graduate education in psychology. Dr. Hunter envisions expanding the program beyond UNO.

Supporting programs like this is just one way BHECN carries out the first pillar of the Nebraska Model — Career Awareness.

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Other efforts to raise awareness of behavioral health careers include programs like the Frontier Area Rural Mental Health Camp And Mentorship Program — or F.A.R.M. C.A.M.P. — which is held annually in the Panhandle and led by the directors of BHECN’s Panhandle site: Cate Jones-Hazledine, PhD, and Tara Wilson, PhD.

The free camp — which has been held annually since 2013 — brings together Western Nebraska high school students for a week to introduce them to careers in behavioral health.

“Many students who have attended FARM CAMP have gone on to pursue behavioral health career paths,” Dr. Jones-Hazledine said.

BHECN also raises awareness through participation in career fairs and the creation of written and online materials that educate and connect people with behavioral health careers.

The goal of all these efforts is to ensure the gateway into behavioral health careers remains wide open for Nebraska students, said Kati Cordts, PhD, BHECN’s Deputy Director, who also oversees the organization’s programmatic offerings.

“Strategically connecting with students as they move through the education system — and connecting them with the opportunities available in the behavioral health workforce — is essential to the success of BHECN’s mission,” Dr. Cordts said.

**“ the first pillar of the Nebraska Model — Career Awareness. ”**



**“ Strategically connecting with students as they move through the education system is essential to the success of BHECN’s mission. ”**



# Career Preparation

## Supporting and Guiding Students Interested in Behavioral Health Careers



**Ali DeLizza, PhD**  
BHECN Associate Director  
of Education and  
Interdisciplinary Provider  
Relations

Were it not for therapy and behavioral health practitioners, Patricia Parish isn't sure her Lincoln-based family would have made it through the struggles they faced during her childhood.

"The issues and challenges our family experienced were numerous and intense — too much for us to handle without help," Parish said.

The gratitude she felt toward the professionals who supported her family inspired her to pursue the field herself, so she could help others facing similar struggles.

After working through bouts of self-doubt and a brief stint as an education major at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Parish switched majors to follow her passion.

It was during her time as an undergraduate that she learned about the BHECN Scholars program — a pathway program that supports undergraduate seniors who plan to pursue master's degrees in Nebraska-based behavioral health programs after graduation. The purpose of BHECN Scholars is to recruit students from across the state into the behavioral

health workforce and ensure their success as practicing, licensed professionals in Nebraska.

Scholars receive tuition support, mentorship, and professional development, and they participate in social and learning opportunities built around a cohort model.

The program is a key component of the Career Preparation pillar of the Nebraska Model.

As she considered graduate school and a career in marriage and family counseling, Parish again wrestled with self-doubt. But the support promised by the BHECN Scholars program gave her hope. She applied, was accepted, and found it was exactly what she needed to move forward with her career in behavioral health.

**"The mentoring and professional development offered by the program were vital to me."**



PHOTO CREDIT: JENNIFER BULL

**Pictured: Patricia Parish (left) and Bianca Mullikin.**

"The mentoring and professional development offered by the program were vital to me," she said. "It really helped me see that pursuing this career path was the right move for me."

The cohort model also proved to be vital to her progress, as it allowed her to connect with other students from across Nebraska who shared her aspiration to become behavioral health professionals.

One member of her cohort, Bianca Mullikin of Wauzeka,

Wisconsin, who studied social work at Nebraska Wesleyan University, became one of her closest friends and provided vital social and emotional support.

Together, they completed their undergraduate studies and went on to pursue graduate programs in behavioral health at Nebraska institutions.

Parish is now earning her master's in marriage and family therapy at UNL, while Mullikin is working toward

a master's degree in social work at Nebraska Wesleyan. "It seemed like our paths were so connected," Parish said of Mullikin. "It was so helpful to have someone going through the same things I was during this journey. It really helped me stay on course."

Mullikin, who started in the Nebraska Wesleyan Master of Social Work program in the fall, said the relationship with Parish helped her maintain focus and drive when her studies became difficult.

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“Having a close relationship with another member of my cohort helped me find more connections within the behavioral health field,” she said. “It has allowed me to become more educated on different pathways while also developing a strong bond with someone who has similar experiences and goals for our careers.”

Of the 11 members of Parish and Mullikin’s BHECN

Scholars cohort, nine have gone on to Nebraska-based graduate programs.

Parish and Mullikin’s experience — and the fact that so many of their cohort continued on to Nebraska programs — demonstrates that the BHECN Scholars program is working exactly as intended, said Alison DeLizza, PhD, BHECN’s associate director of education and interdisciplinary provider

relations, who oversees the program.

“It’s incredibly gratifying to hear that Patricia and Bianca had such great experiences with the program and to see them continue on the path toward becoming behavioral health professionals in Nebraska,” Dr. DeLizza said. “Their experience perfectly illustrates our mission at BHECN — growing and strengthening our state’s workforce.”



## Training Experiences Supporting Behavioral Health Trainees

Cherie Ryan, MSW, has long held passions for justice, mental health, and helping those who are most vulnerable and in need.

These passions revealed themselves early in her life when she saw loved ones struggle through economic or personal hardships that felt unfair.

“When that would happen, a voice would pop up in my head and say, ‘Remember this — and that it doesn’t feel fair,’” Ryan said.

Ryan listened to that voice and held on to those memories and passions, which eventually connected and guided her toward a career in social work. Today, thanks in part to support from BHECN’s Graduate Trainee Support Program (GTSP), Ryan works as a licensed social worker at the Lincoln Regional Center (LRC).

The GTSP — which has supported 47 trainees since it was started in 2023 — is just one of the tools BHECN uses as

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*Cherie Ryan at her workplace — the Lincoln Regional Center*



PHOTO CREDIT:  
JENNIFER BULL



part of the Training Experiences pillar of The Nebraska Model. Other BHECN training programs support psychiatry residencies, psychology internships, psychiatric nurse practitioner trainees and opportunities for undergraduate psychology majors.

GTSP is specifically designed to support training experiences that serve rural, public sector, or justice-involved communities, said Jessica Boren, the BHECN program coordinator who oversees the GTSP.

“Trainees also must intend to practice in Nebraska after they graduate,” Boren said. “It goes without saying that Cherie was a perfect candidate for the program.”

This is actually Ryan’s second stint at LRC — her first was as a mental health technician from 2012 through 2018. During that time, Ryan developed another passion: working with individuals with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI).

“I’ve been told I have a very calming and welcoming presence,” Ryan said. “And those are good traits to have when working with this population.”



As she neared the end of her master’s degree studies in social work at Nebraska Wesleyan University and approached her final practicum, Ryan sought out training experiences that would allow her to connect with and serve that same population. The first opportunity that emerged was at her old workplace — LRC.

During her interview about completing her practicum at LRC, Ryan learned about the GTSP. She subsequently applied for the program and was accepted.

For Ryan, the GTSP support provided her and her family with additional financial resources as she completed her practicum training at LRC earlier this year. Upon completing her practicum, Ryan earned her master’s degree, obtained her social work license, and began working full-time as a social worker at LRC in September — where she now serves individuals with SPMI.

“I’m very excited to have reached my goal of becoming a social worker and to get to work with people I have such a passion for helping,” Ryan said.

# Professional Support

## Retaining and Supporting Behavioral Health Providers

Disconnection and burnout are two common issues contributing to behavioral health workers leaving the field. Long hours spent in sessions treating clients can lead to isolation and fatigue.

To help address these concerns, BHECN has hosted a series of networking events over the past two years. These events have included provider workshops that combined continuing education and self-care opportunities with networking sessions, giving attendees the chance to connect with other professionals.

“Connecting providers with each other is an important way to help ensure they feel supported and avoid the isolation and burnout that truly harm our workforce and our ability to meet the state’s behavioral health needs,” said Ciara Warden, LISW, director of BHECN East, which hosted a provider workshop near Omaha this past summer. The response from providers who attended was overwhelmingly positive, she said.

“The comments and feedback from attendees clearly showed that events such



**Denise Pecha, LCSW**  
BHECN Associate Director  
for Network Initiatives

as these can help remedy the isolation and fatigue that confront those who work in these fields, while at the same time helping them gain important skills they need to continue doing their jobs,” Warden said.

A similar event held by BHECN Southeast later in the year garnered comparable responses, said Denise Pecha, LCSW, associate director for network initiatives.

Given the success of these events, plans are underway for BHECN’s other four sites

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**2025 Provider Workshop**

— BHECN Northeast, BHECN Panhandle, BHECN Central, and BHECN Southwest — to hold similar workshops, Pecha said.

In addition to these workshops, BHECN supports professionals through continuing education opportunities and financial assistance programs. Its continuing education offerings include Project PEACE, which trains primary care professionals to address behavioral health concerns, and a CDC Foundation-supported program that helps behavioral health providers and others assist children in coping after crisis events such as school shootings.

BHECN also provides financial support through the Lifelong Learning Fund (LLF). Professionals may apply for LLF assistance to attend conferences and trainings that enhance their ongoing professional development.

Several projects funded through the BHECN-ARPA Awards Program also were

designed to help alleviate burnout and support professionals currently working in the field.

Evaluation of these projects is underway, but preliminary feedback indicates that the support provided to behavioral health professionals was effective in helping combat isolation and burnout. Some of these professional support initiatives may continue with BHECN funding once the ARPA project concludes at the end of this year.

“The professional support pillar of the BHECN model is designed to ensure that our current workforce — the lifeblood of behavioral health care in our state — has the resources it needs to thrive and provide the best care possible,” said BHECN Director Marley Doyle, MD. “Ensuring that our caretakers are supported and have access to professional development opportunities is essential to retaining and strengthening Nebraska’s behavioral health workforce.”

**“ The professional support pillar of the BHECN model is designed to ensure that our current workforce — the lifeblood of behavioral health care in our state — has the resources it needs to thrive and provide the best care possible. ”**

**— Marley Doyle, MD  
BHECN Director**





# Workforce Research

## Tracking and Evaluating Behavioral Health Workforce Data and Trends



**Melissa Tibbits, PhD** BHECN  
Associate Director for  
Research and Evaluation

BHECN is the nation’s first state-supported behavioral health workforce center, and the only one that tracks and reports state-level behavioral health workforce data longitudinally.

By collecting and analyzing these data, BHECN identifies workforce gaps and designs targeted strategies and interventions to address them. Since beginning this work in 2010, BHECN’s data show that Nebraska’s behavioral health workforce has grown by 49%. Growth has been recorded in 54% of the state’s 93 counties, including in 40 rural counties. Despite this progress, challenges remain. The demand for behavioral health services in Nebraska continues to outpace the growth of the workforce. To better connect its efforts with the state’s behavioral health needs, BHECN has in recent years placed greater emphasis on data evaluation to enhance its ongoing work of tracking state workforce data.

“Tracking and reporting on data is very important, and adding an increased emphasis on evaluation will help BHECN use the data and research findings to create and improve our programs and other offerings in ways that increase our impact on the state’s workforce,” said Melissa Tibbits, PhD, associate director for research and evaluation.



**Jessie Buche, MPH, MA**  
BHECN Director ARPA  
Awards Program

Dr. Tibbits and her team have recently released a series of data snapshots that offer a deeper dive into the state’s workforce data. The snapshots examine the workforce from a variety of angles, including:

- The distribution of the workforce statewide;
- How the workforce is distributed across the state’s six behavioral health regions; and
- The composition of the workforce by behavioral health provider type.

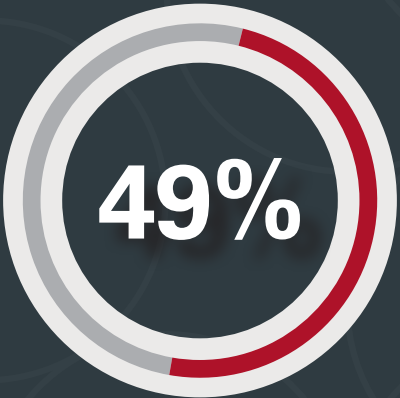
“The new snapshots provide a more nuanced look at our workforce and how it’s composed,” Dr. Tibbits said. “Having this type of data helps provide a clearer picture of where our strengths are, as well as where we still have gaps to fill.”

The new snapshots are a powerful tool that can help BHECN and others craft targeted initiatives that better meet Nebraska’s workforce needs, said Marley Doyle, MD, director of BHECN.

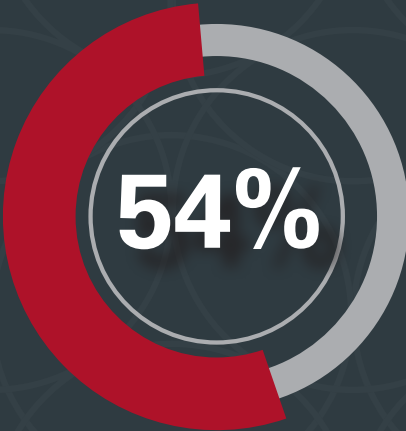
For example, Dr. Doyle said, the snapshots can help BHECN and its partners gain a more detailed understanding of which provider types may have shortages, what specific parts of the state may need certain providers, and which provider types might face challenges in the future due to factors such as how many providers offer telehealth or specialty care. With this understanding, programs can be developed or adjusted to better meet specific needs, she said.

BHECN also is incorporating evaluation into all aspects of its operations, Dr. Doyle said, including its own programs.

Since 2010, BHECN’s data show that Nebraska’s behavioral health workforce has grown by 49%.



Growth has been recorded in 54% of the state’s 93 counties.



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**“It is essential that we know how effective our work is and be able to make real — time adjustments to our programs based on the data.”**

Evaluation of projects supported by the BHECN ARPA Awards Program revealed that some projects are improving and expanding supervision for provisionally licensed behavioral health professionals, a key barrier for many entering the workforce. A major reason supervision poses a barrier is that fully licensed providers receive little to no compensation for their time supervising students and provisionally licensed providers, said Jessie Buche, MPH, MA, director of the BHECN ARPA Awards Program.

“Lack of compensation has caused many licensed providers in Nebraska to forgo being supervisors because they need to take time away from their practices,” Buche said. “This historically made it difficult for students to find needed internships and created barriers for provisionally licensed providers seeking full licensure.”

Through the ARPA Awards Program — established in 2022 after the Nebraska

Legislature charged BHECN with distributing pandemic recovery funds to address key behavioral health issues — 19 organizations in Nebraska received funding to support supervision. The organizations have used the funds to compensate supervisors’ time, pay supervisees, and offset costs for testing materials and other licensure needs.

Evaluation of year-one data from the BHECN ARPA Awards Program showed organizations receiving support to bolster supervision increased the total number of supervisees from 97 to 174, — representing a 110% increase.

A closer look at specific behavioral health professions showed that ARPA support allowed for a 194% increase in the number of mental health counseling supervisees, a 72% increase in social work supervisees, and a 50% increase in drug and alcohol supervisees among award recipients.

“This kind of evaluation could lead to more investment in key areas and also spark other changes that help connect people with successful careers in behavioral health,” Dr. Doyle said. “Given the importance of our mission, which is rooted in improving behavioral health in Nebraska, it is essential that we know how effective our work is and be able to make real-time adjustments to our programs based on the data.

“Evaluation is the key to making that happen.”

## Outreach

### Engaging Nebraska’s academic, community and workforce leaders



**Kati Cordts, PhD**  
BHECN Deputy Director

A unique BHECN partnership among graduate-level education programs connects professionals from multiple disciplines to strengthen Nebraska’s behavioral health workforce — an example of the Nebraska Model’s Outreach Pillar in action.

Formed in 2016, the partnership — called the Nebraska Behavioral Health Education Partnership (NEBHEP) — was created to increase awareness of the statewide need for behavioral health services and to provide a unified voice for behavioral health education programs.

NEBHEP’s effectiveness has since caught national attention. BHECN presented about the partnership at the 2024 National Academy for State Health Policy (NASHP) Conference.

There was initial skepticism about how effective NEBHEP could be, as many participants also competed for students. It quickly became clear, however, that the partners had many areas in which they could collaborate.

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### Nebraska Behavioral Health Education Partnership (NEBHEP)

Connecting unlikely partners is one of the most innovative aspects of NEBHEP, said Kati Cordts, PhD, BHECN's deputy director. In her role, Dr. Cordts oversees NEBHEP, which is composed of 20 academic institutions that provide graduate-level behavioral health education in Nebraska.

David Hof, PhD, a counseling professor at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, said one simple yet impactful way NEBHEP has fostered collaboration is through referring potential students to each other's programs.

"Through the partnership, I have gotten to know other counseling programs in Nebraska, and there are times when our program doesn't have room for more

students that I recommend they apply to other programs at different institutions," Dr. Hof said. "The bottom line is, we need to get more students trained and into the workforce. In that regard, we are all collaborators when it comes to caring for those who need our services."

Input from partners has also helped BHECN create educational programs and other offerings designed to meet key state workforce needs, Dr. Cordts said. Those programs include:

- Financial support for behavioral health students interested in working in rural and corrections settings, and in communities that lack access to care.

- BHECN's Lifelong Learning Fund, which supports professional development opportunities for behavioral health students and professionals; and
- BHECN's Student Advisory Board, which allows students to provide input regarding BHECN programs and initiatives — an idea born from conversations with NEBHEP partners.

As part of its overarching outreach strategy, BHECN has created and continues to strengthen similar networks in other areas, including:

- Nebraska Behavioral Health Training Partnership, a network of 11 organizations across the state that work with BHECN to provide training opportunities for behavioral health trainees and students;
- Nebraska Behavioral Health Workforce Partnership, composed of several organizations throughout the state that collaborate to create a statewide behavioral health workforce development strategy; and
- Behavioral Health Workforce Center Alliance, a coalition of organizations from across the country that come together to identify and share best practices for strengthening state behavioral health workforces.

BHECN also is forming a network of individual providers built from connections made during the BHECN ARPA Awards program. This network will help BHECN maintain open lines of communication with providers statewide to inform discussions about workforce development needs.

"NEBHEP has become a powerful network and an invaluable resource to us in our mission to grow the state's workforce," said Dr. Doyle. "It also serves as a model for our outreach work as forging similar connections with other communities will undoubtedly benefit Nebraska's behavioral health workforce and the people it serves long into the future."

***"Connecting unlikely partners is one of the most innovative aspects of NEBHEP."***





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