

## *The National Health Service Corps: Building Healthy Communities by Supporting Qualified Mental and Behavioral Health Care Providers*

Each year, approximately one in four adults experiences a mental health disorder.<sup>i</sup> Mental illnesses can dramatically impact all aspects of an individual's life, from overall health to social relationships, productivity, and community participation.

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) builds healthy communities by supporting qualified medical, dental, and mental and behavioral health care providers working in areas of the United States with limited access to care. As of October 2010, there are over 2,100 mental and behavioral health professionals serving in the NHSC.<sup>ii</sup>

Through the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program, fully trained and licensed psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurse specialists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, and marriage and family therapists may receive an initial, tax-free loan repayment award of up to \$60,000 for two years of service. Continued service provides the opportunity to pay off all mental and behavioral health professional student loans.

### *Overview of the Mental and Behavioral Health Care Provider Shortage*

Mental health services are often least available to the most vulnerable populations. Most mental health professionals tend to reside in urban, high-population, high-income counties, leaving shortages in rural and low-income urban areas.<sup>iii</sup>

Less than one-third of adults with a diagnosable mental disorder receive mental health services in a given year.<sup>iv</sup> Among children and adolescents, approximately 70 percent of those in need of treatment do not receive any mental health services in a given year.<sup>v</sup> Racial and ethnic minorities are also less likely to have access to mental health services and often receive a poorer quality of care.<sup>vi</sup>

### *Reasons for the Shortage of Mental and Behavioral Health Professionals*

There are several reasons for the mental and behavioral health professional shortage:

- **High cost of undergraduate and graduate education:** According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 40 percent of undergraduate and graduate students have educational debt, and average amount of debt has increased by nearly 50 percent for undergraduates and 40 percent for graduate students over the past decade.<sup>vii viii</sup>
- **Low median salaries, compared to other health professionals:** The following are median salaries for
  - § psychologists – **\$64,140**;
  - § counselors – **\$51,050**;
  - § marriage and family therapists – **\$44,590**;
  - § social workers – **\$39,530**.<sup>ix</sup>



- **Growing demand:** Factors such as increased recognition of the importance of mental health and willingness to seek mental health care are leading to more demand for mental and behavioral health services in schools, hospitals, social service agencies, mental health centers, substance abuse treatment clinics, and private companies.<sup>x</sup>

### *Where Mental and Behavioral Health Care is Most Needed*

**Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs)** are defined regionally by population group or medical need. They can be urban or rural and are classified by a lack of primary care practitioners, dentists, and mental health specialists. All NHSC-approved sites are located in HPSAs and currently, there are more than 12,000 sites.

- There are 3,791 mental and behavioral HPSAs in the United States, with an estimated underserved population of 68,513,118.<sup>xi</sup>
- The total number of mental and behavioral health professionals needed to remove the HPSA designation for all underserved areas is 1,900.<sup>xii</sup>

### *Additional Information*

To learn more about the NHSC and the dedicated mental and behavioral health professionals who provide service in all 50 states and territories, visit [NHSC.hrsa.gov](http://NHSC.hrsa.gov).

### *References*

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