



Addressing the Youth Mental Health Crisis by Bolstering the Mental Health Professional Pipeline

A Policy Brief by the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) | August 2025

The Youth Mental Health Crisis: A Call to Action

Youth and young adults in the United States face a mental health crisis: 20% of young people had a major depressive episode in 2024, with 13% of young people having suicidal thoughts, according to Mental Health America's report, [The State of Mental Health in America](#). Similarly, the [Center for Disease Control](#) found that nearly 40% of young people reported having persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2024.

A national shortage of mental health professionals compounds this issue and disproportionately impacts rural and hard-to-serve young people. In their [November 2024 report](#) on the state of behavioral health professionals, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) noted that more than one third of the U.S. population live in a region where there is a shortage of mental health professionals. [Mental Health America](#) found that in 2024, more than half of young people did not receive treatment for their mental illnesses, and there is only 1 mental health professional for every 340 individuals. This shortage of professionals is [expected to grow](#), underscoring the need for policymakers to invest in and support mental health professional talent pipelines.

The Power of Pre-apprenticeships and Apprenticeships

Pre-apprenticeship programs provide a structured and supportive environment for young people to explore careers, gain foundational skills, and prepare for registered apprenticeships or other avenues of employment. Pre-apprenticeships serve as an introduction for young people to the diverse range of careers in the field, sparking interest and raising awareness of career pathways. More specifically, mental health pre-apprenticeships can provide these young people with training in essential skills, such as communication, active listening, crisis intervention, and cultural competency, which are useful during the transitions to registered apprenticeships or other employment opportunities.

Although data specific to mental health pre-apprenticeships is limited, there are strong returns on investment for pre-apprenticeship programs in general. Employers benefit because pre-apprenticeship programs [help provide](#) ready-to-work employees who have already been screened in some capacity. Pre-apprenticeship programs benefit those enrolled in them, too, providing them with paid learning opportunities, a clear career path, and the opportunity to develop essential soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and money management. By being attractive for both employers and young participants, pre-apprenticeship programs that address the United States' workforce challenges, including the shortage of mental health professionals, should be scaled and replicated across the country. Below, we provide examples of states leading in expanding pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship models for young people.



Innovative Strategies to Expand Training Pathways in the Healthcare Sector: Examples from Colorado, North Carolina, and California

Colorado: To combat significant shortages in the healthcare sector, Colorado has implemented a multi-pronged strategy to expand apprenticeships and training pathways in the mental health field. Colorado's innovation lies in its strategic blending of diverse funding sources and cross-agency collaboration. In 2022, the state allocated substantial federal stimulus funds (\$36 million via SB 22-181) specifically to bolster the behavioral health workforce. Colorado also integrates national service models, with Serve Colorado supporting registered apprenticeships like the Community Health Worker track offered through Colorado Public Health Works, which can potentially leverage AmeriCorps resources alongside state workforce development funds and possible employer tax credits. This coordination across health, labor, higher education, and service agencies creates a unique funding and support system.

North Carolina: The [North Carolina Career Launch](#) is an example of a state-supported pre-apprenticeship for youth and young adults with disabilities that provides students opportunities to gain knowledge, experience and credentials that lead to jobs in high-demand fields. One of the North Carolina Career Launch programs within the health care industry is the [Pre-Nursing Careers Vocational Rehabilitation Youth Pre-Apprenticeship](#). This pre-apprenticeship program provides paid on-the-job learning to high school students with disabilities as well as employment and professional development skills and work and training preparation.

California: California is tackling its behavioral health workforce needs partly through large-scale, state-funded initiatives designed to stimulate apprenticeship growth in non-traditional sectors, including healthcare. Rather than relying solely on federal pass-through funds, California has allocated significant state resources through programs like the Apprenticeship Innovation Funding (AIF) and the California Opportunity Youth Apprenticeship (COYA) Grant, managed by the Department of Industrial Relations' Division of Apprenticeship Standards (DAS). These programs provide substantial funding to help establish and scale apprenticeship programs beyond the traditional trades. The AIF, with \$95 million allocated over its first three years, provides formula funding to eligible programs based on the number of active apprentices and training hours delivered, specifically supporting sectors like healthcare, education, and technology.

Concurrently, the COYA Grant (\$31 million awarded in its first round, with more allocated subsequently) specifically targets the development of pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs for "opportunity youth" (ages 16-24 facing barriers to employment/education). COYA funding explicitly covers planning, implementation, supportive services, and stipends—critical elements for enabling vulnerable youth to succeed in pathways potentially leading to behavioral health careers. California's innovative approach lies in the scale of its state investment and the creation of dedicated funding streams designed to proactively expand apprenticeships into new, high-need fields like behavioral health. By providing significant grants directly from the state, particularly programs like COYA that focus on supportive services for target populations, California aims to lower barriers for both employers developing innovative programs and for individuals, especially underserved youth, seeking entry into these vital careers.



Policy Recommendations

To realize the full potential of youth mental health pre-apprenticeships, policymakers and stakeholders should:

Significantly invest in pre-apprenticeship programs for mental health careers: For young participants, this early engagement demystifies the profession and provides foundational knowledge about mental well-being and ethical practices. Pre-apprenticeships can serve as effective on-ramps to registered apprenticeships or further specialized education, cultivating a larger, more diverse, and better-prepared generation of mental health professionals ready to meet critical community needs. This requires a deliberate review of current regulations and funding guidelines—such as those governing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), state-level workforce initiatives, and Career Technical Education (CTE) pathways—to ensure they explicitly recognize pre-apprenticeship in behavioral health fields as an eligible and prioritized activity. Critically, mechanisms should be established or clarified to allow for the seamless braiding of diverse funding sources (e.g., WIOA youth funds, state education grants, health services block grants) to cover the comprehensive costs associated with these programs, including instruction, participant stipends, and essential supportive services. By ensuring policies are inclusive and funding is flexible and coordinated across relevant agencies (workforce, education, health), we can build a sustainable infrastructure that encourages the development and expansion of these vital pre-apprenticeship pathways into mental health careers.

Support program development: Policymakers and stakeholders should support program development by guiding organizations in designing culturally relevant curricula and establishing strong partnerships with employers and registered apprenticeship sponsors. It is also extremely important that said curricula and partnerships work to embed comprehensive wrap-around services like mentorship, transportation support, mental health resources, and stipends for all young people, which are often especially vital for opportunity youth—young people aged 14 to 26 years old who are not in school or work—to overcome systemic barriers.

For opportunity youth participants, the impact of such well-supported program development is profound, as it translates into more accessible recruitment processes, programs designed with their specific needs and experiences in mind (often incorporating trauma-informed practices), and reliable support systems that mitigate life challenges interfering with participation. All these beneficial impacts of well-designed programs can help lead to clearer, more navigable pathways into meaningful, stable careers in the growing mental health field, fostering economic mobility and purpose.

Support the fostering of public-private partnership: Policymakers should support the fostering of intentional partnerships between workforce development agencies, mental health providers and healthcare entities, educational institutions, and community-based organizations (CBOs). This cross-sector collaboration moves beyond siloed efforts, creating a supportive ecosystem uniquely tailored to the needs of young people facing systemic barriers. Many opportunity youth may be disconnected from traditional education and employment systems;



NATIONAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT COALITION

such integrated efforts mean workforce agencies can provide targeted funding and job readiness, while educational institutions can offer relevant coursework and credentials. Similarly, mental health providers can supply crucial work-based learning and mentorship, and CBOs can deliver essential wraparound supports like housing assistance, transportation, and childcare.

Policymakers should also consider incentivizing mental health providers and healthcare organizations to take on these pre-apprentices and apprentices as employees. The synergy between these agencies, institutions, and entities results in more seamless transitions, holistic support addressing both professional and personal challenges, and ultimately, significantly increases the likelihood that opportunity youth can successfully enter, persist, and thrive in fulfilling mental health careers, while also building a workforce more reflective of the communities it serves.

Conclusion

By investing in, expanding, and replicating proven pre-apprenticeship models that train mental health professionals, policymakers can address the mental health crisis in America and the workforce shortage of mental health professionals.

This policy brief was created by staff of the National Youth Employment Coalition, with support from the NYEC Policy Committee, and was supported by their work on the ABA2 Grant with [FHI 360's National Institute for Work and Learning](#).



NIWL's Registered Apprenticeships are supported by the Employment Training Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor as part of an ABA2 grant award totaling \$8 million with 0% financed from non-governmental sources.

Disclaimer: This workforce product was funded by a grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)'s Employment and Training Administration. The product was created by the recipient and does not necessarily reflect the official position of DOL. DOL makes no guarantees, warranties, or assurances of any kind, express or implied, with respect to such information, including any information on linked sites and including, but not limited to, accuracy of the information or its completeness, timeliness, usefulness, adequacy, continued availability, or ownership. This product is copyrighted by the institution that created it.

Questions on this policy brief can be directed to nyec@nyec.org.