The Emerging Field of Behavioral Health Paraprofessionals

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The behavioral health workforce has traditionally consisted of highly trained professionals with master's or doctoral degrees, such as mental health counselors, social workers, psychologists, and physicians. However, states are increasingly exploring pathways to expand the workforce by including roles requiring less extensive formal education. This shift is driven by efforts to address workforce shortages and create opportunities for individuals with diverse backgrounds and experience levels.

Key developments include:

- States are implementing multi-level certifications for substance use professionals, ranging from peer professionals (requiring a high school diploma) to master's-level counselors. As of 2023, 49 states have formal credentials for peer professionals.
- Fewer states have established formal training or credentials for behavioral health workers outside peer roles or substance use settings.
- There is growing interest in incorporating professionals with more accessible education levels into the workforce to address shortages and reduce reliance on master's-level providers.

Emerging roles, referred to as “behavioral health paraprofessionals” or “Behavioral Health Support Specialists,” include:

- Peer Specialists (peer support workers)
- Community Health Workers
- Behavioral Health Technicians/Aides

While credentialing these roles is not a complete solution for workforce shortages, it complements other strategies, such as licensure compacts, expanded education and training, and telehealth. States are experimenting with regulatory approaches for these paraprofessional roles, but further research is needed to develop national terminology and standards.

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