

Creating an Optimal Work Environment for Clinicians Caring for Individuals with SMI

In order to support optimal clinical outcomes and recovery for people who have serious mental illness (SMI), a foundation must exist for a strong and resilient mental health workforce. However, the public mental health sector faces long-term challenges in recruiting and retaining clinicians. These challenges have increased in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and a competitive labor market.

This brief guide offers best practices to create an optimal work environment and support retention for frontline staff who care for individuals with SMI.

Actionable Steps for Administrators and Supervisors

Create a Welcoming Onboarding Experience

- ✔ Design an informative and personalized onboarding process that reflects your community's values and culture.
- ✔ Assign mentors to guide new staff and help them navigate the complex care of people who have SMI.
- ✔ Implement a referral program that incentivizes existing staff to introduce talented colleagues.

Cultivate a Positive Company Culture

- ✔ Regularly assess your organization's values and ensure actions align with them.
- ✔ Host town halls and Q&A sessions to encourage open communication and feedback.
- ✔ Implement a robust system to collect and respond to employee feedback.
- ✔ Create a comprehensive change management plan that includes the goals of the change, stakeholders, communications strategies, and support for employees.

Build Strong Community and Connection

- ✔ Foster collaboration and teamwork through interdepartmental projects and social events.
- ✔ Establish a mentor program that lets experienced staff guide and support newer colleagues.
- ✔ Encourage and support peer networks to foster collegiality and well-being.

Manage Workload and Fairness

- ✔ Prioritize staffing to avoid critical shortages and prevent excessive workloads.
- ✔ Offer flexible work arrangements to accommodate individual needs and promote work-life balance.
- ✔ Implement regular workload assessments and adjust accordingly to ensure fairness and sustainability.
- ✔ Offer competitive salaries and benefits packages.
- ✔ Provide reimbursement for license renewals.
- ✔ Implement strategies to [recognize](#) and [mitigate](#) signs of burnout in clinical and administrative staff.

Show Appreciation

- ✔ Recognize and reward outstanding performance through public acknowledgements, bonuses, or additional time off.
- ✔ Organize regular staff appreciation events to celebrate achievements and boost morale.

Encourage Continuous Learning

- ✔ Invest in professional development opportunities such as conferences, leadership development programs, workshops, or tuition reimbursement.
- ✔ Provide staff with continuing education opportunities.
- ✔ Support supervision for clinicians as they prepare for licensure.
- ✔ Provide training and tools to do work as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Empower Your Workforce

- ✔ Implement anonymous feedback mechanisms and an open-door policy to encourage constructive criticism.
- ✔ Conduct exit interviews to understand the reasons that staff depart and identify areas for improvement.
- ✔ Empower staff to contribute to decision-making processes and advocate for positive change.

This guide can provide a useful starting point for managers and clinical supervisors to support an effective and resilient workforce that cares for individuals who have SMI. More detailed guidelines are available in the Advocates for Human Potential's [recruitment and retention toolkit](#). It is important to tailor these strategies to local resources and needs, such as size of an organization; patient case mix; local job market; and state scope of practice and supervision regulations.

Resources

Advocates for Human Potential, Inc. Building Blocks for Behavioral Health Recruitment and Retention Overview. SAMHSA. <http://toolkit.ahpnet.com/Home.aspx>.
SMI Adviser. (2019). Webinar: Burnout and Beyond in Mental Healthcare Professionals. <https://education.smiadviser.org/url/product/S1902002>
SMI Adviser. (2022). Webinar: Evidence-based Strategies for Addressing Burnout and Enhancing Well-being for Mental Health Providers. <https://education.smiadviser.org/url/product/S4223702>