Rochester colleges expand mental health workforce training amid shortages

Caurie Putnam // October 21, 2026 //

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Summary:

- Nazareth offers accelerated social work degree pathways
- St. John Fisher integrates mental health with primary care training
- Monroe Community College launches mental health technician program
- Over 500 mental health counseling graduates from St. John Fisher

An estimated 40% of Americans live in federally designated mental health professional shortage areas, according to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration. Regional health assessments reflect similar challenges in the Rochester area, with access to care a concern in underserved urban neighborhoods and rural communities alike.

As the need for services persists (federal projections show 18% job growth for substance abuse and mental health counselors by 2035), Rochester-area colleges, universities and health care organizations are finding new ways to train and retain the next generation of professionals.

Nazareth University

“We are seeing our students be recruited for jobs like never before,” said Leanne Wood, MSW, Ph.D., professor, co-chair and director of the undergraduate social work program at Nazareth University.

Wood said students are increasingly being hired while completing their internships, reflecting the growing demand for mental and behavioral health professionals.

To help meet that demand, Nazareth offers flexible pathways to careers in social work, including online and hybrid learning options and graduate specializations in school social work, evidence-based mental health practice and trauma-informed care.

Leanne Wood

Students can also pursue accelerated degree pathways, including a four-plus-one program that allows them to earn a bachelor's degree in social work and a master's degree in social work in five years. Those entering with sufficient college credits earned during high school may be able to complete both degrees in four years through a three-plus-one pathway.

"We've tried to start to offer these specializations that target these areas of need as well, that are both of interest to students, but also serving the community," said Cory Cummings, MSW, Ph.D., associate professor, co-chair and director of Nazareth's graduate social work program.

Practical experience is another cornerstone of Nazareth's approach. Graduate students entering with a BSW complete a 500-hour field placement, while those without a social work undergraduate degree complete two placements totaling 900 hours.

Students gain experience through partnerships with health care organizations, schools and community agencies throughout the Rochester region. The university also maintains relationships with organizations serving older adults, including St. Ann's Community and Lifespan, while also cultivating new placement opportunities.

Cummings emphasized the importance of pairing fieldwork with classroom seminars, where students reflect on their experiences and learn to apply academic knowledge to real-world situations.

"We've maintained that as really a cornerstone of what we think is important for students," he said.

Beyond social work, Nazareth offers programs in creative arts therapy, music therapy and psychology. The university has also expanded its offerings to include applied behavior analysis, developed in partnership with Mary Cariola, and school psychology, a program created in response to an identified gap in the local workforce.

Despite these opportunities, Wood identified the cost of education as a significant obstacle for prospective professionals, particularly students whose backgrounds and experiences could help meet the needs of underserved communities.

Cory Cummings

“Probably the number one barrier that we see our students experiencing is being able to meet the cost of education,” Wood said, noting Nazareth is working to address those barriers through scholarships, employer partnerships and participation in workforce development funding initiatives.

For Cummings, preparing future behavioral health professionals also means preserving the personal connections central to social work, even as educational options expand.

“I really think we have committed to humanized learning,” he said, describing an approach that emphasizes meaningful relationships between faculty and students and prepares graduates to collaborate across health care disciplines.

St. John Fisher University

For Robert Rice, Ph.D., professor and chair of the mental health counseling program at St. John Fisher University, preparing the next generation of behavioral health professionals means bringing mental health and medical care closer together.

Rob Rice

“A lot of people won’t go see a mental health provider, but they’ll go to their primary care doctor,” Rice said, explaining that having mental health professionals available in primary care settings can help reduce stigma and improve access to services.

Fisher’s mental health counseling program is housed within its Wegmans School of Nursing, an arrangement Rice describes as unusual and one that creates opportunities for interdisciplinary training. Since 2016, the university has developed programs and clinical placements focused on integrating mental health services into primary care, particularly in underserved Rochester communities.

This approach has allowed mental health counseling students to take some courses alongside future psychiatric nurse practitioners, helping both groups understand how their roles complement one another and prepare for collaborative patient care.

“We continue to provide enhanced training in integrated care and maintain placements in primary care settings,” Rice said.

Partnerships with health care organizations are essential to that work. Fisher maintains a close relationship with Rochester Regional Health, including clinical placements and discounted tuition opportunities for eligible Rochester Regional employees pursuing nursing and mental health counseling programs.

“I think the only way we’re going to continue to figure out how to meet the demand for mental health practitioners is through collaboration and partnerships,” Rice said.

Despite growing interest in mental health careers, Rice identified several challenges to expanding the workforce, including the cost of graduate education and competition for qualified clinical training sites and supervisors.

As more institutions expand or establish mental health programs, demand for those placements increases, creating another potential bottleneck in preparing professionals.

Still, Rice sees evidence of Fisher’s impact throughout the Rochester region. Since joining the faculty in 2009, he has watched more than 500 students graduate with master’s degrees in mental health counseling, along with several hundred graduates in psychiatric nursing. Most have entered the local workforce, and many now hold leadership positions in area hospitals and health care organizations.

“I couldn’t be more proud of my students, present and former, and the faculty,” he said.

Monroe Community College

Monroe Community College is helping address the region’s behavioral health workforce shortage through programs designed to make education accessible while providing students with practical experience.

“We created the Hospital and Community Mental Health Technician Program (HC01) in 2022 as a direct result of addressing this void of workers within the mental health field,” said Nasim Sarvaiya, MSW, assistant professor of human services at MCC.

The program requires three semesters of internships and connects students with community organizations and health care providers, including URMC, NAMI, East House and Helio Health. These partnerships help students understand the complex needs of individuals seeking mental health services.

“Our partnerships with community agencies and health care providers are essential because human services is a field that students really need to experience, not just study,” Sarvaiya said.

MCC also offers an associate degree and certificate in addictions counseling through programs approved by the New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS). The programs prepare graduates to apply for the Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor-Trainee (CASAC-T) designation and provide practical experience in approved settings.

Courtney Gazda, MS, an instructor in MCC's Department of Education and Human Services, said the certificate is particularly valuable for individuals who already hold a degree and want to specialize in substance use disorder treatment.

"Our certificate in particular is designed for individuals who already have a degree so they can quickly learn the most current substance use trends and how to support individuals with substance use disorder (SUD)," Gazda said.

Affordability is another focus. Through SUNY Reconnect, eligible adults aged 25 to 55 can pursue certain degree programs with educational costs covered. MCC students may also qualify for the SUNY Mental Health Internship Program, which provides paid, supervised field experiences at designated sites.

Students in addictions counseling can apply for the OASAS Addiction Professionals Scholarship Program, which may cover tuition, mandatory fees and paid internship hours, along with other financial support.

Beyond education and training, both faculty members emphasized the importance of preparing students for the emotional demands of behavioral health careers.

"A challenge in developing SUD professionals is that this field can be emotionally taxing at times," Gazda said.

Sarvaiya also stressed the importance of creating sustainable careers for behavioral health professionals, who frequently work with individuals and families experiencing trauma, crises and complicated life circumstances.

"We need to recruit talented people, but we also need to create working conditions that allow them to stay in the field," Sarvaiya said.

That includes adequate compensation, opportunities for advancement and attention to burnout and stress. Sarvaiya cautioned that increasing the number of graduates alone will not solve the workforce shortage.

"We cannot address a workforce shortage simply by graduating more students; we also have to build a system in which professionals can thrive and the people who need services can actually access the helpers," Sarvaiya said.

Rochester Regional Health

For Rochester Regional Health, meeting the growing demand for behavioral health services requires recruiting and retaining professionals across a wide range of specialties and care settings.

Eve Hosford

“Demand remains strong across nearly every area of behavioral health and addiction treatment and recovery,” said Eve Hosford, LCSW, vice president and chief administrative officer of behavioral health at Rochester Regional Health.

That demand extends across the continuum of care, from community-based and outpatient services to crisis intervention, inpatient treatment and specialty programs.

“Building and sustaining this workforce is essential to ensuring people can access the right care, in the right setting, when they need it,” Hosford said.

To recruit and retain professionals, Rochester Regional Health has adopted a multifaceted approach that includes loan repayment programs, clinical supervision toward advanced licensure, career advancement opportunities and employee wellness initiatives.

The health system is also expanding opportunities for peer professionals in addiction recovery and crisis services, while emphasizing team-based care, leadership development and continuing education to support employees throughout their careers.

Partnerships with colleges and universities are another important component of its workforce strategy. At any given time, more than 50 students and trainees participate in Rochester Regional Health’s behavioral health programs, representing disciplines including social work, mental health counseling, psychology, nursing and medicine.

“These partnerships give students meaningful, real world clinical experiences while also creating an important pipeline for the region’s future behavioral health workforce,” Hosford said.

The relationships also expose students to the variety of careers available in behavioral health while helping Rochester Regional identify and develop future employees.

“We are especially excited when students who trained with us during internships or clinical placements choose to continue their careers at Rochester Regional Health,” Hosford said.

Despite those efforts, Hosford expressed concern about changes to federal student loan programs that limit financing options for graduate students pursuing careers in helping professions such as social work. She cautioned that the changes could have broad implications for the future workforce.

Looking ahead, Hosford emphasized the importance of recruiting professionals with diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, alongside strong clinical skills.

“Behavioral health is inherently multidisciplinary, and our strongest teams bring together people with different expertise and perspectives around a shared commitment to the people and communities we serve,” she said.