



Northern Counties Health Care, Inc.
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FQHC/Service Provision

Northern Counties Health Care (NCHC) has embedded behavioral health specialists (BHS) in our five primary care clinics located throughout the northeast kingdom. These providers include mental health and substance abuse clinicians, some of whom are dually-licensed, working with patients having mental health, substance use, and co-occurring disorders. NCHC now has 9 prescribers for medication assisted therapy (MAT). Blueprint Hub & Spoke teams provide support to this population. We are also a recipient of a HRSA MAT expansion grant that has allowed us to hire unlicensed, master’s level BHS/MAT clinicians who provide counseling and care coordination for this population. The foundation of the MAT grant is to train a workforce resulting in licensure. NCHC has a master’s level BHS intern from Springfield College.

The Blueprint for Health provides the framework, through the community health teams, for our regional care coordination efforts for these populations. All of the health centers have chronic care coordinators who collaborate with community health workers, and case managers/emergency service workers from the designated agencies, in addition to BHS and MAT staff.

Gaps/Barriers

Currently, the providers and patients at NCHC have few options for psychiatric support. There are no psychiatrists available in the towns where our five health centers are located. For many years, clinics relied on psychiatric nurse practitioners through designated agencies to provide care. These resources have decreased significantly resulting in little or no access for our patients. In fact, patients with complex psychiatric needs are being returned to their PCPs for prescribing of psychotropic medications from the designated agency due to their own lack of psychiatric resources. There were two consulting psychiatrists in nearby towns, but both have stopped practicing in our region. As psychiatric demands have increased throughout our state, health clinics and mental health agencies with psychiatric resources have been forced to close access to patients outside of their catchment areas. This has increased the access problem for our patients, providers, and community.

The other significant barrier is NCHC’s lack of preferred provider status which negatively impacts our ability to provide LADC training. The HRSA MAT expansion grant supports NCHC in training Master’s level clinicians with the end result being both mental health and substance abuse licensure. Currently, we are unable to fulfil this piece due to the need for preferred provider status.

Recommendations

NCHC is in the process of recruitment for a psychiatric nurse practitioner (PNP). Options for educational loan repayment programs would be a significant recruitment incentive.

Credential NCHC as a preferred providing training site for Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselors.

Increase financial support to the designated agencies that would allow improved recruitment and retention of their staffing to support the many Vermonters struggling with complex social and psychiatric needs.

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