

STARK COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH & ADDICTION RECOVERY: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

The demand for mental health and addiction services has never been higher. In addition to the opioid crisis, our community is dealing with teen suicides, stagnant wages, a shortage of prescribers for needed medications, and an increase in complex disorders that require the services of a more educated and skilled workforce.

Compounding the problem is a general shortage of qualified behavioral health workers. Local provider agencies have been unable to recruit and retain enough individuals to meet current needs. Fewer people are choosing careers in behavioral health, but even for those who wish to work in the field, meeting educational requirements can be prohibitively expensive. Other contributing factors include an aging workforce, high levels of stress and turnover, extensive educational requirements coupled with low compensation packages, and licensure and credentialing requirements.

John Aller is the Executive Director of Stark Mental Health & Addiction Recovery (StarkMHAR). He says, "We believe that with the right approach, building a qualified and enthusiastic workforce can be a significant achievement that will have obvious positive ripple effects throughout our community."

The Sisters of Charity Foundation is partnering with StarkMHAR to implement innovative solutions. The Workforce Development Initiative will follow a three-part plan to build capacity:

The University of Akron (UA) will offer a four-semester master's degree program in social work, right at StarkMHAR.

The University will prioritize the enrollment of employees from StarkMHAR-funded agencies. Each student will receive a \$750 stipend after every semester. The agencies will also receive stipends for offering field placement opportunities and supervising the students, who will be expected to remain with their agency for at least two years after earning the degree.

Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) are needed as well. APNs can prescribe medication, which reduces the need for psychiatrists. Kent State University offers a four-semester APN program. As part of the coursework, each APN student completes a practicum at an approved agency. Stipends of \$1,500 per semester will be provided to students who complete their practicums at StarkMHAR-funded agencies. In exchange for the stipends, the students are expected to remain with their agency for at least two years after earning their degree. The agencies supervising these individuals will receive stipends as well.

In order to increase staff retention, StarkMHAR will rely on the services of the Markwood Partners consulting firm. Markwood staff will help each agency develop a retention plan. Agencies will also receive small grants that may be used for sign-on bonuses, retention bonuses, shift differential pay, and related purposes.

While this first step will help build momentum, the Workforce Development Initiative will require sustained focus—and additional innovations—to yield the strong, educated, and sustained mental health workforce our community needs.



Focused On Building Capacity

