

## Leadership academy cultivates future behavioral health leaders

Workforce shortages have dominated discussions in behavioral health care for years. But as many provider organizations also grapple with succession planning and leadership development, some are expanding their focus beyond recruiting clinicians to cultivating future leaders throughout their organizations. The New Jersey Mental Health Institute (NJMHI) established the NJMHI Leadership Academy for Behavioral Healthcare Professionals for that purpose.

NJMHI notes that the Leadership Academy offers emerging

leaders in the mental health, substance use disorder and intellectual/developmental disabilities fields opportunities to advance their careers. The program is open to both New Jersey Association of Mental Health & Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA) members and nonmembers and is available to professionals across a range of roles within the behavioral health field.

NJMHI officials pointed to the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis in the Health Resources and Services

Administration, which shows an average projected unmet need of 64% across 11 categories of behavioral health care providers. The estimated shortages in most of these categories are at least 50%, and two of them are greater than 90%: psychiatric nurse practitioners (98%) and child, family and school social workers (94%).

These dire statistics helped inform the need to establish the NJMHI Leadership Academy for Behavioral Healthcare Professionals, now entering its fifth year, said officials.

*Continues on page 6*

Continued from page 5

Debra L. Wentz, Ph.D., executive director of NJMHI, also pointed to a recent report by The Conference Board, an independent, non-profit research organization focused on business, workforce and economic issues. In its report on workforce strategy, The Conference Board recommended a multi-pronged approach to workforce development that includes expanding education and training opportunities while creating clear career pathways.

"The NJMHI Leadership Academy for Behavioral Healthcare Professionals reflects those principles by helping participants apply leadership training directly to the work that people are doing," Wentz, who is also CEO of NJAMHAA, told *MHW*.

### Mentors, coaches

Deemed as a cost-effective solution to workforce development, the Academy pairs behavioral health professionals with mentors and executive coaches from diverse industries, offering what program officials believe is a unique blend of sector-specific guidance and cross-disciplinary insight (see "Leadership Academy boosts New Jersey behavioral health workforce strength," *MHW*, Aug. 20, 2025; <https://doi.org/10.1002/mhw.25250>).

The mentorship program provides a pathway to career success and serves as an important investment in professional development, Wentz said. Participants feel valued and more engaged in their work, which can lead to greater productivity and stronger long-term commitment to the behavioral health field, she noted.

Organizations also benefit, Wentz noted, through lower recruitment and hiring costs and a stronger leadership pipeline that helps ensure business continuity. "When a staff member performs well that positively impacts the organization's bottom line," she said,

**"Most people are not entering this field with the expectation of making a fortune. They're doing it because they want to make a difference."**

Debra L. Wentz, Ph.D.

Everyone in the program has an opportunity to advance professionally, regardless of their role, whether in human resources, finance, public policy, clinical services or other areas, Wentz said. Through close interaction with experienced leaders, mentees gain exposure to a variety of perspectives and leadership styles. Participants meet monthly over a 12-month period and engage in one-on-one sessions with mentors and coaches. In some cases, mentoring is conducted in small groups of three participants, she added.

"Each quarter, we bring in inspirational and motivational speakers who help participants explore different career paths and leadership opportunities," Wentz said.

### Feedback, testimony

The academy's focus on developing future leaders is reflected in feedback from its coaches. Anne E. Collier, MPP, JD, PCC, a Leadership Academy coach and founder and CEO of Arudia, said the program helps participants build the skills and confidence necessary to lead effectively. "Being a leader or manager requires a lot of a person. We need to make sure that people have the right tools, support and mindset to take on the responsibility successfully," Collier stated in a news release. "The program is well rounded and structured for maximum impact."

"The mentorship and coaching I received helped me navigate one of the biggest professional

transitions of my life: moving from an interim CEO role to a permanent one," stated Jennifer Hughes, LCSW, 2025-2026 Leadership Academy Mentee and CEO of the New Jersey chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, in a news release.

Wentz noted that the behavioral health care landscape has changed significantly in recent years, particularly amid ongoing economic pressures. Provider organizations continue to struggle for adequate funding while competing for a limited workforce.

"Most people are not entering this field with the expectation of making a fortune," Wentz said. "They're doing it because they want to make a difference." Many behavioral health care professionals are drawn to the field because of lived experience, recovery experiences or a personal commitment to helping others, she added.

"What distinguishes the Leadership Academy is its affordability," said Wentz, adding that the yearlong program costs \$900 per participant, making it an accessible investment for organizations seeking to develop and retain talent.

For more information about the NJMHI Leadership Academy for Behavioral Healthcare Professionals, contact Shauna Fuzes at [shauna@njmhi.org](mailto:shauna@njmhi.org).