



COLORADO **HEALTH** INSTITUTE

2025 – 2026 Regional Roadmap

Scaling Inclusive Pathways in Behavioral Health

SEPTEMBER 2025



Introduction

This document presents the 2025 – 2026 Regional Roadmap: Scaling Inclusive Pathways in Behavioral Health, a strategic framework developed by the Colorado Health Institute (CHI), Jobs for the Future (JFF), and Kaiser Permanente Colorado. The Roadmap responds to the growing behavioral health crisis in Colorado and the urgent need to expand and diversify the behavioral health workforce. Drawing on research and input from nearly 100 educators, employers, policymakers, funders, and early career adults, the Roadmap outlines long-term goals, objectives, and actions to remove barriers, strengthen career pathways, and build a sustainable workforce that reflects the communities it serves. It serves as both a guide and a call to action for regional partners committed to advancing equity and opportunity in the behavioral health system.

The Need

For more than a decade, rates of [poor mental health](#), [suicide](#) and [deaths related to substance use](#) in Colorado have steadily trended upward. According to the [Colorado Health Access Survey](#), more than one in four Coloradans (26.2%) reported poor mental health in 2023, more than doubling in the past 10 years. And despite Colorado's efforts to improve access to behavioral health care, an estimated 880,000 people (17%) said they could not get the mental health care they needed. Of those unable to get treatment, 57.2% cited difficulty getting an appointment as their top barrier to care — beating the cost of care (53.9%) for the first time in the survey's history.^{1,2,3}

While the need for care continues to overwhelm the system, a shortage of behavioral health workers — whose titles range from peer recovery support specialist to psychologist — has led to high burnout rates, and barriers to entering these professions are all contributing to a [critical provider shortage](#).⁴ [Preparation for these careers](#) can involve pursuing a master's, doctoral or medical degree; license or certification; and supervised clinical hours such as a residency.⁵

The cost and time required of career-seekers to complete educational requirements, pay for certification or licensing, and support themselves while completing unpaid or underpaid clinical field hours is often prohibitive. And practice requirements vary by state, which can be confusing. Career obstacles like these can be

26.2%

of Coloradans reported poor mental health in 2023



more difficult to overcome for people of color, yet the need for diverse providers and [culturally competent care](#) is more important than ever.⁶

In 2023, Kaiser Permanente Colorado partnered with JFF and CHI on the Scaling Inclusive Pathways initiative, an effort to streamline pathways to behavioral health careers and reduce obstacles for all young adults who are interested.

As the initiative's facilitator, CHI engaged educators, behavioral health employers, community and government leaders, policymakers, funders, young adults, and other stakeholders in this work. Through research and feedback from nearly 100 of these stakeholders, CHI, JFF, and Kaiser Permanente Colorado developed the 2025 – 2026 Regional Roadmap: Scaling Inclusive Pathways in Behavioral Health. This Roadmap outlines a strategic framework designed to advance this work in the Denver metro region.

This group hopes to use this Roadmap to break down barriers, bridge opportunity gaps, and grow a thriving behavioral health workforce that reflects the region's communities.



The Process

Throughout 2023, JFF and CHI engaged with stakeholders at all levels of the workforce development ecosystem across the Denver metro region. This initial work helped to identify critical system stakeholders, existing programs, infrastructure, and funding to support career pathways for youth.

JFF and CHI engaged a core team of regional partners to advise on planning and implementation of this Roadmap. This core team comprises representatives from CareerWise Colorado, the Colorado Workforce Development Council, Colorado Youth for a Change, Denver Health and Hospital Authority, Economic Development and Opportunity at the City and County of Denver, Denver Public Schools, Front Range Community College, Kaiser Permanente Colorado, and young adult representatives. CHI began convening this core team monthly in October 2024.

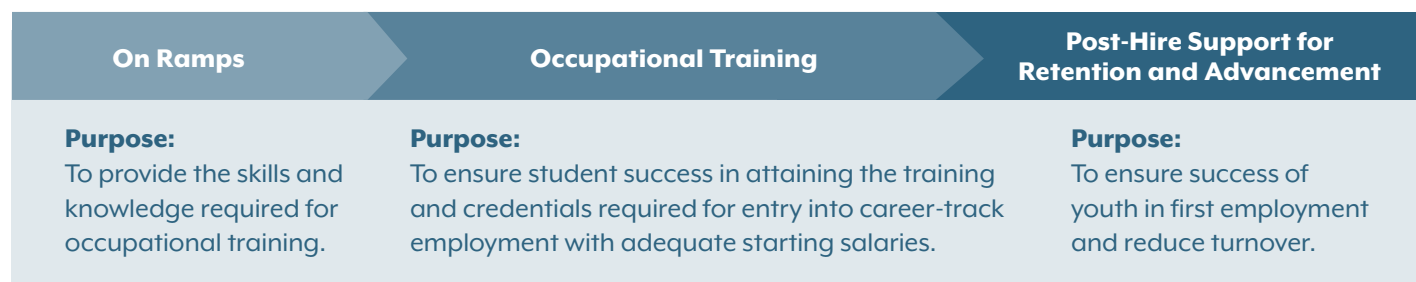
Stakeholders reported that while the Denver metro area has robust work-based learning and career pathways for in-school populations, there is limited

re-engagement with young adults who are not a part of the education or workforce system — a group they described as “opportunity youth.” Additionally, employers noted that resource and internal policy constraints inhibit their ability to hire young adults for [registered apprenticeships](#).⁷

In December 2024, CHI gathered a broader group of stakeholders across the Denver metro region for a single-day convening to gain further insight into regional needs within the initiative’s three goals. Through conversations facilitated by JFF and CHI, attendees identified regional strengths, needs, and ideas for action to scale behavioral health pathways for young adults. Group discussions were framed through JFF’s Back on Track: CareerNext model (Figure 1), which outlines how young adults can prepare for and transition into occupational training programs for high-demand jobs with clear advancement opportunities.

Ongoing collaboration with lead partners remains essential to achieving the Roadmap’s goals and fostering a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient behavioral health workforce across the Denver metro region.

Figure 1: JFF’s Back on Track: CareerNext Model



The Roadmap

The 2025 – 2026 Regional Roadmap: Scaling Inclusive Pathways in Behavioral Health is organized around three long-term goals. Figure 2 illustrates these goals and their underlying objectives.

Goals, Objectives, and Actions

This Roadmap provides an overview of each goal, overarching objectives and actions to advance each goal, and measurable outcomes. Objectives and actions for each goal should center dignity and respect of young people — a key priority identified by young adult stakeholders — and financial sustainability — a key priority of employers.

Actions and outcomes throughout the Roadmap will be measured through April 2026 and the Back on Track: CareerNext phases — On-Ramps, Occupational Training, and Post-Hire Support — should be considered as a part of its implementation.

Goal 1: Increase the number of young adults entering and succeeding in high-quality behavioral health career pathways.

Objective 1.1: Develop a Regional Behavioral Health Career Pathways Map

During the convening, representatives of several stakeholder groups identified silos between employer needs and information available to young adults as barriers for those entering the behavioral health workforce. Objective 1.1 will help stakeholders identify the gaps and opportunities in the behavioral health workforce development ecosystem specific to local communities. This objective will remove silos between stakeholders and blend existing resources like [My Colorado Journey](#) — a well-developed tool that articulates career pathway options — with regional programs and expertise.

Action: Draft and design a career pathways map.

With support from CHI, JFF will develop a map that illustrates behavioral health occupations and their trajectories, required credentials and training, skills

Figure 2: Goals and Objectives of the 2025 – 2026 Regional Roadmap

Goal 1:

Increase the number of young adults entering and succeeding in high-quality behavioral health career pathways.

Objective 1.1:

Develop a career pathways map for the region.

Objective 1.2:

Strengthen regional career navigation.

Goal 2:

Increase the number of employers adopting robust practices in retention and advancement of young adults.

Objective 2.1:

Engage employers directly to expand pathways and address barriers.

Objective 2.2:

Align with regional behavioral health sector partnership.

Goal 3:

Increase engagement with regional organizations to develop capacity and sustain pathways.

Objective 3.1:

Strengthen regional education and workforce programs to further pathways design.

Objective 3.2:

Track progress and impact through data collection.

and competencies, opportunities for those with lived experience, and local employers. Users will be able to explore along the phases of JFF's Back on Track: CareerNext model (see Figure 1). The map can help regional professionals identify gaps in programming, opportunities for program development/scaling, and potential partnerships to strengthen the behavioral health workforce pipeline.

- **Lead Partners:** JFF and CHI teams, Colorado Workforce Development Council
- **Desired Outcome:** Designed map to be shared with stakeholders by December 2025

Action: Explore the development of a map tailored to opportunity youth.

Once key stakeholders have provided feedback on the map, future funding could support refining it to focus more on young adults rather than professionals. This will allow young adults to see the process and options through the CareerNext framework.

- **Lead Partners:** JFF and CHI teams
- **Desired Outcome:** Forum identified for stakeholders to discuss the needs of a young adult-specific career pathways map by April 2026

Objective 1.2: Strengthen Regional Career Navigation

Stakeholders identified the need to strengthen regional career navigation, again citing lack of connections between programs and general knowledge about what exists. Fragmentation and limited awareness are barriers that prevent young adults from knowing about available opportunities and reaching their potential. While several programs provide quality entry-level training and workforce preparation, the region faces key challenges in career navigation. Career navigation services are primarily limited to K-12-connected youth, with a gap in support for young adults after they exit the K-12 system.

Action: Develop a career navigation training package.

JFF will facilitate a comprehensive professional development opportunity that integrates peer and shared learning opportunities with asynchronous training. JFF will develop a community of practice for local practitioners to build capacity and enhance career navigation support for young people interested in behavioral health careers.

- **Lead Partner:** JFF team
- **Desired Outcome:** 40 professionals complete training by December 2025

Goal 2: Increase the number of employers adopting robust practices in retention and advancement of young adults.

Objective 2.1: Engage Employers to Expand Pathways and Address Barriers

Stakeholders identified a primary barrier to increasing the behavioral health workforce as a lack of employers ready to hire young adults as interns, apprentices, or staff. With technical assistance from JFF's proven expertise in apprenticeship expansion, Objective 2.1 connects CHI with behavioral health employers to better understand barriers, advance their programming, and help build capacity. Employers who lack the ability to meet one-on-one for technical assistance could instead benefit from best practice education and resource sharing.

Action: Engage with interested employers to expand pathways.

Young adults and training providers cited the need for clear pathways for entry and advancement in the behavioral health workforce ecosystem. CHI and JFF, in collaboration with the core team, will identify a short list of initial employers to engage with and discuss what challenges exist to

providing young people with work-based learning experiences and employment in the organization, as well as highlight the role that employers can play in reducing barriers.

- **Lead Partners:** CHI and JFF teams, Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council, CommonSpirit Health, Denver Health, and others
- **Desired Outcome:** Tailored technical assistance for at least three employers by April 2026

Action: Package and share resources and highlight best practices.

To address employer barriers more broadly, JFF will develop training materials and resources to support best practices via webinars and/or one-pagers. While materials are being developed, CHI will work to identify and highlight employers that have successfully implemented programs for young people. Throughout this process, CHI and JFF will continue to elevate youth voices in the resources.

- **Lead Partners:** CHI and JFF teams
- **Desired Outcome:** Resources broadly distributed by December 2025

Objective 2.2: Align With Regional Behavioral Health Sector Partnership

The regional Behavioral Health Sector Partnership, a joint endeavor by the Jefferson County Business and Workforce Center and Workforce Boulder County, brings employers and community partners together to address industry challenges around workforce and ecosystem development. Stakeholders identified this partnership, started in the fall of 2024, as a critical space for ongoing regional discussions.

Action: Connect with sector partnership leads.

CHI will work closely with regional sector partner leaders to be responsive to their needs.

- **Lead Partners:** CHI team, Jefferson County and Boulder County Workforce Centers
- **Desired Outcome:** Ongoing participation in sector partnership meetings and sharing of Roadmap updates

Goal 3: Increase engagement with regional organizations, outside of behavioral health employers, to develop capacity and sustain behavioral health career pathways.

Objective 3.1: Strengthen Regional Education and Workforce Programs

By connecting directly with organizations to advance programming and capacity, CHI will strengthen regional education and workforce programs to further pathway development.

Action: Create connections with education and organization partners.

CHI will continue to foster connections with innovative schools, workforce programs, and community-based organizations engaged in behavioral health pathway development and coordination. This may include discussions with an intermediary about young adults receiving credit for work-based learning opportunities.

- **Lead Partners:** CHI and JFF teams
- **Desired Outcome:** Connect with three organizations on capacity building by December 2025

Objective 3.2: Track Progress and Impact Through Data Collection

CHI and JFF will gather data to show progress on this initiative to guide program improvement and grant reporting. Data will help determine the areas of greatest change and opportunities for continued funding.

Action: Develop and implement data collection processes.

CHI and JFF will discuss regional data needs and assess data collection with stakeholders.

- **Lead Partners:** CHI and JFF teams
- **Desired Outcome:** Data collection process in place by July 2025; data collected and analyzed by April 2026

The Road Ahead

Colorado stands at a pivotal moment. Bold, collective action can dismantle silos, empower young adults with career navigation tools, and inspire employers to invest in the next generation. The 2025 – 2026 Regional Roadmap: Scaling Inclusive Pathways in Behavioral Health charts an ambitious course to build a more inclusive and resilient workforce by increasing access to behavioral health careers, strengthening employer engagement, and enhancing regional capacity to sustain these pathways.

As CHI, JFF, and Kaiser Permanente Colorado continue to steward this work, their continued engagement of partners across the behavioral health workforce ecosystem will be essential.

If you are interested in this work, please email CHI at info@coloradohealthinstitute.org.



Acknowledgments

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Colorado Workforce
Development Council



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Endnotes

¹ 2023 CHAS: Mental Health. (2024). Colorado Health Institute. <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/2023-chas-mental-health>

² Phu, K. Suicide in Colorado. (2021). Colorado Health Institute. <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/suicide-colorado>

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⁴ Policy Snapshot: Behavioral Health Workforce Shortages and State Resource Systems. (2024). National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/labor-and-employment/policy-snapshot-behavioral-health-workforce-shortages>

⁵ Behavioral Health Career Descriptions. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/about/careers/behavioral-health-workforce/careers-by-state/descriptions>

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⁷ Apprenticeship Colorado. The Office of the Future of Work. State of Colorado. <https://apprenticeship.colorado.gov/>



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