

How PMHNPs Can Benefit Your Behavioral Health Organization

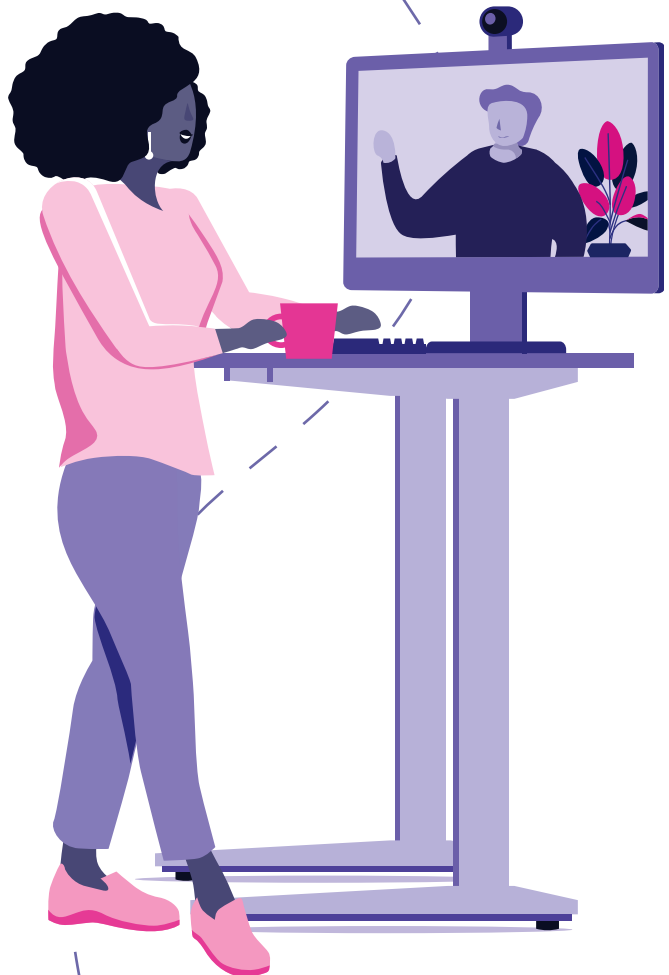
The Evolving Role of PMHNPs in the Behavioral Health Landscape

As of 2023, there are approximately 385,000 licensed PMHNPs across the United States, and that number is growing steadily -- with more students enrolling in PMHNP programs each year (NP Fact Sheet, 2020) (Chapman et al., 2018).

As this role has evolved over the decades, PMHNPs have been able to practice as independent behavioral health providers in more and more states. Today, 30 states currently allow nurse practitioners to practice independently, which means PMHNPs can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to patients (State Practice Environment, 2023). However, in many states, PMHNPs continue to be underutilized.

Organizations can utilize PMHNPs to help address the nationwide shortage of behavioral health providers, meet their patient populations' needs, and decrease patient wait times.

This guide will lay out how PMHNPs differ from psychiatrists, what they are trained to do, how you can incorporate them into your behavioral health organization, and legal considerations you should keep in mind when doing so.



How PMHNP and Psychiatrist Education and Experiences Compare

While PMHNPs and psychiatrists are different provider types and have different training and education requirements, as behavioral healthcare providers, the treatment they can provide is very similar.

- Both PMHNPs and psychiatrists have graduate-level education, and PMHNPs are required to have either a Masters or Doctorate in nursing to sit for the PMHNP certification exam.
- Once a PMHNP is certified, they can practice across the patient lifespan -- meaning they can treat children, adolescents, adults, and geriatric populations.
- While psychiatrists can also treat patients across their lifespan, they often opt to undergo further fellowship training that equips them to treat specialized patient populations.
- Both PMHNPs and psychiatrists are eligible to earn an X-waiver, which allows them to prescribe buprenorphine to treat patients with substance use disorders.

Refer to the chart below for a direct comparison of the educational and training requirements PMHNPs and psychiatrists must meet.

Educational and Training Requirements for PMHNPs and Psychiatrists

PMHNP

- Bachelor's degree
- Prior experience as an RN
- Masters or Doctorate in nursing
- 600-800 precepted clinical hours in a psychiatric treatment setting
- Board Certified by examination required to practice (American Nurses Credentialing Center)
- Board certification population is across the lifespan
- Eligible for X-waiver

Psychiatrist

- Bachelor's degree
- Medical School (MD or DO)
- 4 years of General Psychiatry residency (Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education accredited)
- Optional fellowship training in specialized populations
- Board Eligible or Certified
- Eligible for X-waiver

How PMHNP Training Fits into your Behavioral Health Organization

The number of certified PMHNPs continues to grow every year. Behavioral health organizations can improve their quality of care and decrease patient wait times by incorporating PMHNPs into their care teams. Recent studies have found that the quality of PMHNP care is similar or equal to that of psychiatrists (Chapman et al., 2018)

This similar quality level is due to not only the rigorous amount of training PMHNPs receive but also the specific type of training they receive -- much of which is geared towards helping the kinds of patient populations CMHCs and FQHCs often see.

Like psychiatrists, all PMHNPs are trained to assess, diagnose, and treat patients with mental health needs. However, PMHNPs' training is also specifically focused on holistic care.

Through that training, PMHNPs develop skills and experience around treating the whole patient -- often considering mental and physical treatment in tandem -- which contributes to the high quality of care they can provide to patients in the CMHC and FQHC settings.

Many nursing programs also train PMHNPs to focus on psychosocial factors that may contribute to mental health and well-being. Careful consideration of these factors can determine how successful a certain treatment plan is for any given patient.

If these skills and experiences would benefit your organization, a PMHNP may be a good fit due to the specific training they receive.

Consider the specific training PMHNPs receive, the types of treatment they provide, and how they can benefit your organization:

Psychotherapy and behavioral health conditions

PMHNPs receive extensive training in psychotherapy. Through this and their required psychopharmacology training, PMHNPs effectively treat common behavioral health conditions, including mood disorders, anxiety, substance use, depression, ADHD, and schizophrenia. Healthcare organizations who face a large volume of patients dealing with these conditions should consider hiring a PMHNP or partnering with a virtual care provider like Iris Telehealth to gain access to PMHNPs who can treat patients in their state.

Crisis intervention and directing patient care planning

As part of their nurse practitioner training, PMHNPs are trained in crisis intervention and can utilize de-escalation techniques to support patients who enter your health center in a state of distress. PMHNPs are also skilled at care coordination and can help provide consultations and referrals to psychiatrists and other specialists as needed.

Collaborative care

PMHNPs are trained to work in collaborative care teams, where they may work with psychiatrists, social workers, community managers, or nurses to find a care plan that can treat a specific patient's needs effectively. If your organization values collaboration across your care team and is looking for a provider who will work within your existing framework, you may consider adding a PMHNP to your roster.

Effective communication with patient families

Due to their holistic care training, PMHNPs are equipped to interact with patient families or caregivers -- particularly when treating young patients or patients from vulnerable populations.




Utilizing PMHNPs to Benefit Your Organization and Patient Populations

Whether or not a PMHNP will be a good fit for you and your patient populations depends on what kind of behavioral health organization you have. While they are occasionally present in med-surg units, acute care ambulatory hospitals, and psychiatric inpatient units, psychiatrists are often the preferred provider type for these facilities. This preference is due to the fact that patients in acute care facilities often have a more complex and severe presentation of an acute, unstable, or exacerbated mental health condition. Psychiatrists generally have more training and experience in this hospital setting and with these kinds of patients.

CCBHCs, CMHCs, and FQHCs in more rural areas may be more likely to incorporate PMHNPs into their behavioral health services because it is often more difficult to find psychiatric providers in those areas. Additionally, clinics, health centers, and health systems with constrained financial resources might consider hiring a PMHNP, as they may better fit their budgetary needs.

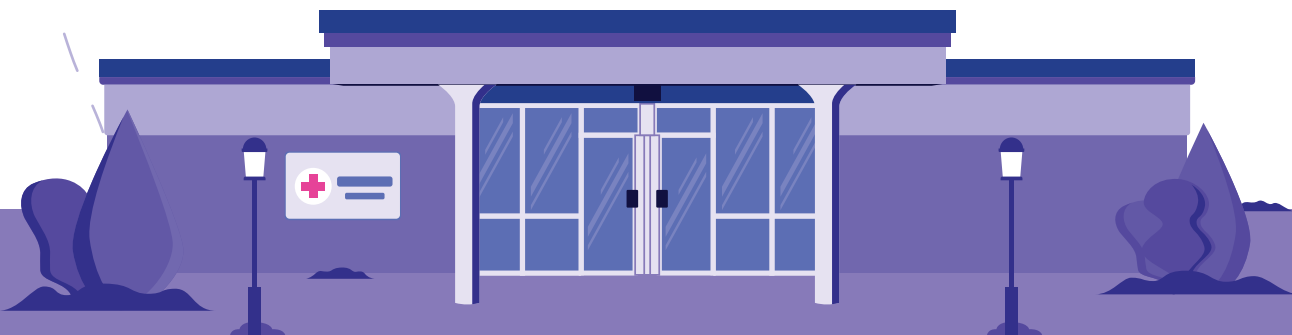
If you are looking for a provider and are unsure what the best fit for your needs is, look at your location and patient populations. If you are in a rural area and are predominantly working with patients with mood disorders and other common behavioral health conditions, PMHNPs may be a good fit. If your organization is in more of an acute care setting, psychiatrists might be a better fit for you and your patient populations.

Virtual care providers like Iris Telehealth can also help increase accessibility by allowing behavioral health organizations to consider and hire PMHNPs and psychiatrists from across the country instead of just those who are local.



“Our PMHNPs are a vital part of our mental health care team. PMHNPs bring a unique perspective and offer much skill and understanding of psychopharmacology and mental wellbeing to their patients. PMHNPs have been instrumental in helping bridge the gap and lessen the shortage of mental health prescribers.”

LaDonna Chirpas
Lead Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner
Iris Telehealth



Legal Considerations

As you consider whether a PMHNP could benefit your organization, it is important to be aware of your state's regulations. For example, a PMHNP in Texas could see patients and provide assessment and diagnosis, but they would not be able to prescribe without having an established Prescriptive Authority Agreement in place with a physician. However, in Oregon, a PMHNP can prescribe medication without a physician's collaboration and can even practice independently.

State regulations can drastically impact the care PMHNPs can provide (State Practice Environment, 2023).

States largely fall into three regulatory categories:

1. Full practice

In full-practice states, PMHNPs can evaluate, diagnose, and treat patients by prescribing medications without consulting with a physician. In these states, PMHNPs can also set up independent practices if they so choose. There are currently 30 full-practice states across the country.

2. Reduced practice

Reduced practice states limit PMHNPs' ability to practice fully and independently. Often, PMHNPs will be required to hold a collaborative agreement with a psychiatrist in order to provide full patient care and prescribe medications to treat their patients.

3. Restricted practice

In restricted practice states, PMHNPs must work directly with a psychiatrist or other healthcare provider and cannot prescribe medications to patients without that psychiatrist's supervision. There are currently 11 restricted practice states in the U.S.

When considering which provider type to hire, you should research what regulations exist in your state. If you live in a restrictive state, you should plan to have consulting psychiatrists available to prescribe medication in collaboration with your PMHNP.



Hiring a PMHNP

Hiring PMHNPs can be a challenging task, particularly for behavioral health organizations located in rural areas. If you've decided PMHNPs are a good fit for your organization, there are several recruitment options and partners you can consider. Utilizing these partners can help you discover highly qualified candidates and set you up for success in your recruitment journey.

Nurse practitioner associations

If you're looking for a local PMHNP, you can research nurse practitioner associations at the regional and state level. These associations often have job boards where you can post potential openings and get your position in front of qualified candidates.

Local universities

Universities with nursing programs will often also have job boards and can be beneficial partners when looking for a PMHNP in your area.

Virtual Care

Virtual care partners like Iris Telehealth can be valuable resources to help your organization source and vet potential PMHNPs before adding them to your team.

Using a service like this will give you access to PMHNPs at a national level, opening up a network of qualified providers and helping to get them licensed in your state. For example, through a virtual care partner, a PMHNP living in California could meet the licensure requirements in Utah and practice there, alleviating the pressure of finding a qualified, local provider.

Be aware that there is a high saturation of providers on the East Coast and a high need for providers on the West Coast. If your organization is located in a rural community on the West Coast, developing a formal telepsychiatry program will help provide high-quality care for your patient populations and substantially decrease patient wait times.



It's All About the Patients

Because psychiatrists' availability is limited across the country, particularly in rural communities, it is important to consider how your organization can best serve your patient populations and provide high-quality care. PMHNPs can serve as key behavioral health providers who can extend access to your services, meet patient needs, decrease wait times, and become long-term, collaborative team members.

PMHNPs are skilled in caring for patients and developing interpersonal relationships with them. For patients seeking mental health treatment, that kind of relationship can be particularly valuable in improving their conditions. They bring valuable experience dealing with sick patients and vulnerable populations to the table, which can be a major benefit to a behavioral health organization -- particularly CCBHCs, CMHCs, and FQHCs, who often see a high volume of patients from vulnerable populations.

We hope this guide helped you evaluate whether a PMHNP would be a good fit for your organization and your patient populations. Please contact Iris Telehealth if you have any questions about this guide or want to learn more about how virtual care can help build out your team of providers.

Sources

1. Chapman, S. A., Phoenix, B. J., Hahn, T. E., & Strod, D. C. (2018). Utilization and Economic Contribution of Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioners in Public Behavioral Health Services. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 54(6), S243-S249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2018.01.045>
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