

# From Competencies to Curriculum:

## *Building Career Paths for Frontline Workers in Behavioral Health*

By Randall Wilson

### Executive Summary

**W**orkers on the front lines of behavioral health play a critical role in the care of people with mental illness, substance abuse problems, and other disorders.

Their work includes de-escalating crises, ensuring patient safety, and promoting recovery, yet these staff members often lack clear guidelines and training on how to perform their roles. They also lack paths to higher-skilled, higher-paying occupations, leading many of the best to leave behavioral health for better opportunities.

This case study examines a unique effort to address that gap by identifying the competencies needed for frontline workers in behavioral health. It documents the work of “Southeastern Pennsylvania Behavioral Health Initiative: Bridging Jobs to Careers,” a Philadelphia-based partnership anchored by a labor/management training fund and two of the city’s leading employers serving people with mental illness. This partnership is part of *Jobs to Careers*, a national initiative that is developing the skills and career paths of workers on the front lines of health and health care. The hallmark of *Jobs to Careers* is “work-based learning,” an approach to educating workers that taps the potential for instruction and skill development in the job itself, using job tasks and responsibilities to teach both work-related and academic skills. Work-based learning builds on the competencies needed by workers to perform their jobs and links learning activities to job tasks requiring these competencies.

The education of this vital workforce is being redefined by the project, which was initiated by Philadelphia’s District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund, a joint labor-management partnership of a union and 53 local hospitals and long-term care employers in Philadelphia. Partnering with the Training Fund is a team of researchers from the University

of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and two behavioral health employers: Temple Episcopal Hospital and Public Health Management Corporation.

Temple Episcopal is a 114-bed behavioral health facility affiliated with Temple University Health System. It employs 91 full-time and part-time behavioral health workers and 10 crisis response technicians. Public Health Management Corporation serves over 88,000 consumers in the Philadelphia region and has over 1,000 employees.

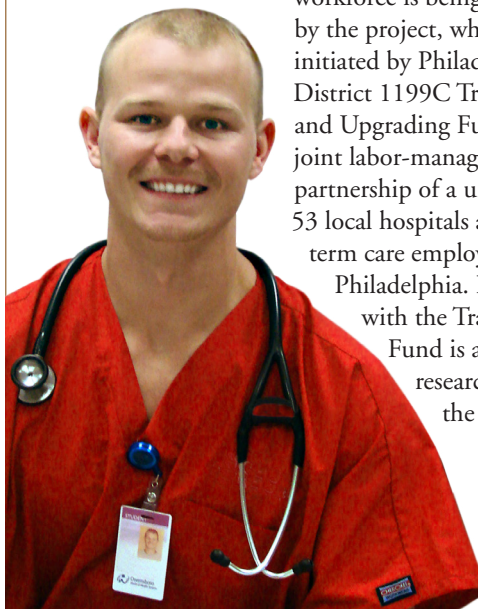
The project uses job competencies as the foundation for creating a curriculum and career paths for frontline workers in behavioral health. To do so, it focuses on the tasks and skills necessary to perform behavioral health jobs. This is the first effort to analyze job requirements systematically for frontline workers in behavioral health and to link that analysis to workforce and career development.

This report is written for employers and educators of the frontline workforce in health care—providers of direct care and support to patients, whose work often goes unrecognized. It demonstrates why competencies matter, especially for jobs lacking formal credentials or career paths. By defining the skills and knowledge needed to perform jobs, competencies give workers the tools to serve patients well, and they give their employers guidance on promoting and developing first-tier staff for higher-skilled positions.

### Launching *Jobs to Careers* in Philadelphia

A growing movement in behavioral health seeks to build advancement opportunities for frontline workers. Advocates believe that not only would the workers themselves and their families benefit, but so would the consumers, employers, and funders of behavioral health services. At the center of this movement is the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund.

In 2006, the Training Fund received a grant to participate in *Jobs to Careers* with a project to improve career advancement opportunities for behavioral health workers. Despite the Training Fund’s history of training behavioral health workers, it had not focused on changing the industry’s basic workforce practices. Education and training continued to be minimal in most workplaces, and a curriculum offered by the Training Fund and Philadelphia University, while providing the basics for frontline psychiatric jobs, did not provide frontline mental health workers with the



full range of competencies and knowledge necessary to advance on a career path or to support consumers' recovery. A major goal of the *Jobs to Careers* project is to use newly identified competencies to upgrade the behavioral health curriculum. The university, in turn, will assess the new curriculum to determine the number of credits awarded to those completing it.

### What It Takes to Do the Job: Identifying Competencies

The Training Fund engaged Kenneth J. Gill, Ph.D., and his colleagues at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey—School of Health Related Professions to oversee the identification of competencies and the development of a curriculum to match them. The UMDNJ team had two major tasks: documenting the competencies required to carry out behavioral health work as currently practiced in the employer sites; and injecting competencies that move the work to a higher level of performance and responsibility.

Both tasks require “validation”—getting expert confirmation that the competencies identified are the right ones and reflect the best knowledge in the field. The team relied on two kinds of expertise. First, they combed the academic and professional literature, including previous job analysis and task delineation studies in behavioral health and research on “evidence-based practice” in psychiatry. The second kind of validation, and for Gill the most critical, came from “subject matter experts”: the men and women who do the jobs, their direct supervisors, and, in some cases, behavioral health consumers.

### From Competencies to Curriculum

After documenting the competencies, the UMDNJ team refined the definitions of tasks suggested by workers and supervisors into specific learning objectives. These provided the skeleton for a behavioral health curriculum. The results point to the ambitious and comprehensive effort mounted for *Jobs to Careers*, as well as to the genuine complexity of frontline behavioral health workers' jobs.

In cooperation with the employers and the Training Fund, the research team grouped the competencies and associated learning objectives into three modules, based on similar areas of competency. The modules, each of which is roughly equivalent to six academic credits, are: Core Behavioral Health Knowledge; Interpersonal Competencies and Crisis Intervention; and Skills Training, Group Skills, and Teamwork. For each module there is a series of desired job role behaviors, which in turn are accompanied by learning objectives, or what the worker needs to know to be competent in that behavior.

Matching specific learning objectives to distinct learning modes demonstrates the importance of job competencies to work-based learning. Learning factual information and theories—about program policies, symptoms of mental illness, or approaches to recovery, for example—lends itself to the lecture-and-discussion format of a seminar. Demonstrating how these and other facets of the job are applied, and testing them against the real experiences of workers and consumers, requires learning from action, or work-based learning. Educators, project managers, and behavioral health workers in the project have all noted this essential difference in both curriculum and instruction.

### Transforming Professional Development

As of fall 2008, two cohorts of frontline workers at Temple Episcopal Hospital and one from Public Health Management Corporation had completed the Core Behavioral Health Competencies and Interpersonal Skills/Crisis Intervention modules of the new curriculum. Findings on the impact of competency-based training will be available in 2010, with the release of final results from the *Jobs to Careers* national evaluation, as well as a study of return on investment from the Temple Episcopal project.

Those results could have important consequences. One is rooted in the potential to offer better service to consumers, based on the notion that those with mental illness have the potential to recover. Another is the impact of a work-based, competency-oriented curriculum on human resources and organizational practices.

The competency approach also has a strong potential role in the creation of wage and career advancement pathways for participants completing behavioral health training. The development of standard, competency-based curricula could enrich and expand “in-service” or required professional education. There is also potential to sustain this model financially by incorporating the curriculum into in-service education. Workers who attain competencies through work-based learning would also be building a foundation for college study.

Perhaps the most far-reaching consequence of the competency approach and work-based learning in *Jobs to Careers* would be its impact on the wider field of behavioral health. This project provides an example of what it means to take frontline workers' jobs seriously—understanding workers' contributions, while expanding their knowledge and their role in the care-giving process. And the careful research, validation, and translation of competencies into curricula lays a promising foundation for other employers, educators, and regulatory and funding bodies.