



***SAMHSA-HRSA  
Center for Integrated  
Health Solutions***

# Understanding the National Health Service Corps

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*A Guide for Community Behavioral Health Providers  
and Primary Care Partners*

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## INTRODUCTION

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) is administered by the Bureau of Clinician Recruitment and Service in the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The NHSC builds healthy communities by supporting qualified medical, dental, and behavioral healthcare providers working in areas of the United States with limited access to healthcare services. Behavioral health providers comprise about a third of the NHSC.

This guide is intended to assist behavioral health sites interested in applying to become NHSC-approved sites. It also describes the ways in which sites benefit from NHSC participation, including opportunities to recruit providers and residents dedicated to working where they are needed most. In addition, information is included for clinicians interested in taking advantage of NHSC employment, including an overview of the NHSC loan repayment benefits.

With the national trend toward the integration of behavioral health and primary care treatment systems, especially in the public sector, the NHSC offers a variety of options for professionals interested in loan repayment in these work environments. NHSC offers valuable resources to support recruitment and retention efforts within health delivery sites that seek to hire both behavioral health and primary care professionals to work in integrated treatment settings.

NHSC plays an important role in addressing the country's healthcare workforce shortage and is expanding to help meet the need for practitioners. Additional funding through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) has enabled the NHSC to grow significantly. More than 9,000 NHSC members will care for more than 9 million people by the end of 2011, more than doubling the size of the Corps since 2008.

The National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare was awarded support from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and HRSA to develop the SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions (CIHS). CIHS provides training and technical assistance to facilitate health integration in safety net provider systems (e.g., community behavioral health centers and Federally Qualified Health Centers). For more information on health integration and CIHS, visit [www.CenterforIntegratedHealthSolutions.org](http://www.CenterforIntegratedHealthSolutions.org).

Agencies interested in applying to be an NHSC service site may obtain guidance and technical assistance on the application process by contacting NHSC at [info@nhscrtsc.net](mailto:info@nhscrtsc.net) or 1-877-313-1823.

## SITE ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

An NHSC service site is a facility that has applied and been deemed eligible to participate in the NHSC program, which provides financial incentives to healthcare professionals who provide services at those sites. NHSC sites are located throughout the United States in both rural and urban areas. Eligibility criteria include the following:

- Sites must be located in federally designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). Mental Health HPSAs are determined by mental health catchment areas, which are geographic jurisdictions of a community mental health center. However, they may also be defined by counties, groups of counties, or sub-county groups of census tracts or minor civil divisions. If a site is not physically located in an HPSA, it may still be eligible for designation as an HPSA facility as long as the organization can demonstrate that it serves an underserved population and has insufficient licensed professional capacity to meet client needs. [The Colorado Primary Care Office provides a review with examples of the data required to calculate HPSA scores.](#)

**What is a HPSA?** NHSC sites qualify by residing in federally designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) or by obtaining a population or facility-based HPSA designation. HPSA scores range from 1 to 25, quantify shortage of medical primary care, mental health, or dental care providers, and are determined by data from State Primary Care Offices and providers. A higher HPSA score indicates a greater shortage of health services.

- Sites must accept all patients, regardless of their ability to pay, and provide services on a discounted fee schedule for patients below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- NHSC sites must be eligible to receive Medicare, Medicaid, and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) payment for any items or services furnished, ordered, or prescribed.

There are eight eligible practice site types: Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC); FQHC Look-Alikes; Rural Health Clinics (RHC); Hospital Affiliated Primary Care Outpatient Clinics; Indian Health Service, Tribal Clinics, and Urban Indian Health Clinics (ITCU); Correctional Facilities; Private Practices (solo/group); and Other Health Facilities (Community Outpatient Facility, Community Mental Health Facility, Critical Access Hospital, State and County Department of Health Clinic, Mobile Unit, Free Clinic, Immigration and Customs Enforcement Health Service Corps).

Since HRSA does not specifically categorize individuals receiving substance abuse services as an “underserved” population, substance abuse provider organizations are not typically eligible unless the substance abuse services are provided under the larger umbrella of mental health or primary care services because. However, clinicians providing substance abuse services within an otherwise eligible site may be eligible for NHSC benefits if their profession is classified as one of the eligible provider types listed in the [Basic Facts](#) section of this document.



## APPLYING TO BE AN NHSC SITE

- Determine if you are located in a HPSA by entering your address in HRSA's [HPSA Locator](#). (All web resources are listed at the end of this document.)
- Contact your [State Primary Care Office](#) (PCO) as soon as possible. Your PCO will walk you through the application process and answer any questions.

Each state has a [Primary Care Office](#) (PCO) that administers programs to address health professional shortages, such as the NHSC and International Graduate Medical Waiver Programs. PCOs also are responsible for requesting and updating HPSA designations, and some provide state maps of mental, dental, and primary care HPSAs online.

- [Apply online at the NHSC website](#). Review the [NHSC Service Site Reference Guide](#) for details about what it means to be an NHSC site before you begin the application process.

## BENEFITS OF BECOMING AN NHSC SITE

- **Recruitment & Retention Assistance.** By joining the NHSC, service sites can recruit clinicians to provide healthcare services in their communities.
  - NHSC sites can recruit clinicians through the NHSC National Recruitment Site List (also referred to as the NHSC Job Opportunities List), a comprehensive list of NHSC-qualifying job openings across the nation and a resource for NHSC applicants and members.
  - NHSC providers are eligible to apply for additional financial support in return for additional service, supporting the retention of NHSC members at NHSC sites.
  - NHSC site approval is not specific to a single discipline. Once approved, a site may hire NHSC providers across disciplines as long as it has a corresponding HPSA designation for that discipline (e.g., an approved site located in a Primary Care HPSA and a Mental Health HPSA may hire NHSC clinicians in both disciplines without requiring separate NHSC site approvals).
- **Networking Opportunities.** NHSC provides sites opportunities to network with one another. In addition, NHSC sites are able to develop and foster partnerships with academic institutions and other community organizations.
- **Technical Assistance.** NHSC sites have direct access to state PCOs, which provide technical assistance to NHSC service site applicants submitting site applications, as well as recruitment assistance to NHSC-approved service sites. Recruitment assistance and other support for NHSC sites can also be obtained through the NHSC Recruitment, Training, and Support Center at 877-313-1823.

## NAVIGATING THE APPLICATION

- The [NHSC site application](#) is located online and submitted electronically. Applicants must create a Site Administrator account on the website prior to beginning the application process. Applications are generally processed within 6-8 weeks, although applications from private practice sites require 3-4 months for processing because they require a site visit prior to determination of approval.
- It is important to establish and maintain contact with your state PCO early in the application process. They will help determine your site's type of practice, identify application needs, and answer questions during the application process; they will also help with the NHSC site application. It is advisable to designate a single staff person to manage communication with the PCO. If your site does not have a HPSA score, the PCO can also assist you in getting one.

**TIP:** Work with your state PCO to identify and collect data that demonstrates the need for behavioral health services in your community.

- Do not be discouraged from applying if you do not have all of the data requested by your PCO and HRSA. Some data is better than no data and PCOs generally help applicants with additional data collection.
- Behavioral health sites participating in the NHSC employ a range of primary and behavioral health professionals, with some employing multiple clinicians at several sites within their organization. For organizations that include multiple clinics or other service-provision sites, each site within the organization must apply separately to be considered for designation as an NHSC site. Clinicians participating in the NHSC can practice only at approved sites. Qualified sites must recertify every 3 years unless exempt from this requirement.

## BASIC FACTS FOR CLINICIANS AND ADMINISTRATORS

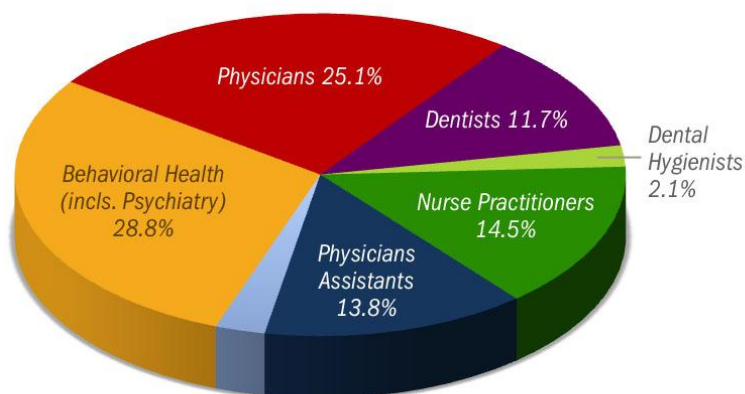
- The NHSC offers financial incentives, as well as education, networking, and training, to support qualified healthcare providers who choose to bring their skills where they are most needed.
- The NHSC Loan Repayment Program (LRP) starts with an initial, tax-free award of up to \$60,000 for 2 years of service. Corps members can receive up to \$170,000 in loan repayment for completing a 5-year service commitment. Continued service provides the opportunity to pay off all one's health professional student loans. As of FY 2011, the NHSC LRP now allows providers to work halftime for 4 years to receive a loan repayment award of \$60,000 or halftime for 2 years to receive \$30,000.

The NHSC LRP provides eligible providers with loan repayment for up to the full amount of their qualified educational loans, in addition to their full salary.

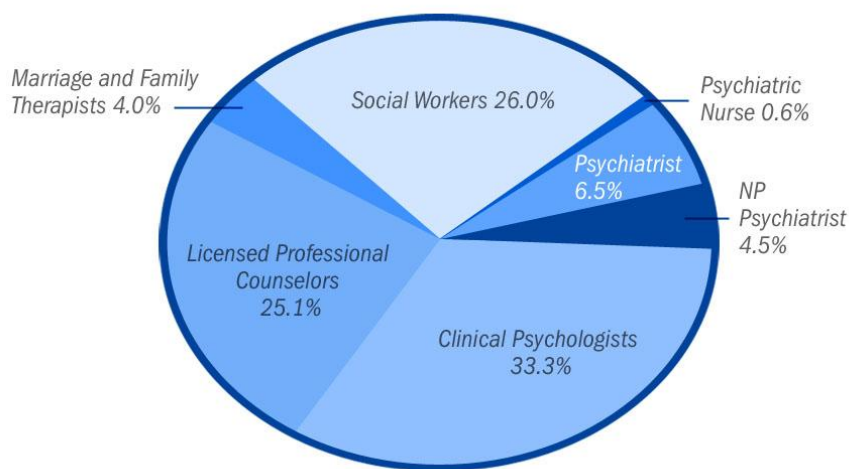
- The NHSC LRP is intended as a financial incentive for providers. NHSC sites cannot reduce salary levels for NHSC providers who receive this benefit. It is the site’s responsibility to ensure the sustainability of salary levels and reimbursement strategies for providers obligated to a NHSC service commitment.
- Clinicians must have an employment offer from an NHSC site. Employment must commence within 60 days of submitting an application. Clinicians already employed at the site may also apply to the NHSC. Applicants should review the [NHSC LRP Application and Program Guidance](#), which provides detailed information on the application process.

### Distribution of Health Professions in NHSC

Source: 2010 NHSC Field Strength



### Distribution of Behavioral Health Professions in NHSC



- Clinicians must be licensed for independent practice, and receive a competitive salary and benefits from an eligible site.
- The following behavioral health professionals are eligible to work at sites with Mental Health HPSA designations: psychiatrists, health service psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, psychiatric nurse specialists (e.g. psychiatric mental health nurse, nurse practitioner, and psychiatrist), marriage and family therapists, and licensed professional counselors.
- The following health professions are eligible to work at sites with Primary Care and Dental HPSA designations: primary care physicians (MD or DO), nurse practitioners (primary care), certified nurse midwives, physician assistants (primary care), dentists, and dental hygienists (general, pediatric and geriatric).

- NHSC clinicians must work within the HPSA designation that corresponds with their discipline. For example, a primary care physician is only eligible for the NHSC LRP if s/he works in a Primary Care HPSA and a psychiatrist is only eligible if s/he works in a Mental Health HPSA. Because multiple HPSA designations may apply to any given site, integrated care settings may often serve as eligible NHSC work settings for providers across disciplines.

HPSA scores are assigned based on specific criteria that rank provider shortages in a specified area. HPSA Scores range from 0 to 25 for primary care and mental health, and 0 to 26 for dental.

- Limits on the number of health professionals per site have been significantly raised to allow up to 36 behavioral health clinicians to work at each site. Sites with higher HPSA scores are allowed more clinicians. The higher the HPSA score, the greater the need for health professionals. In the highest HPSA bracket (scores between 14 and 26), the NHSC will support up to 18 psychiatrists, plus a combined total of 18 other behavioral health providers (clinical or counseling psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, or psychiatric nurse specialists), for a total of 36 NHSC behavioral health clinicians. In the lowest HPSA bracket (scores between 0 and 9), the NHSC will support up to 12 psychiatrists (MD or DO), plus a combined total of 12 other Behavioral Health providers, for a total of 24 clinicians.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **My organization is not located in a Health Professions Shortage Area (HPSA). Is it still eligible to become an NHSC site?**

Yes, it may still be eligible to become an NHSC site if it can be designated as a facility HPSA. To be designated as a facility HPSA, the site must:

- Be a public or private non-profit facility
- Serve a designated area or population HPSA
- Be reasonably accessible to an area or population HPSA: a significant percentage of patients must come from designated areas or population
- Be located within 40 minutes of the population to be served
- Have no significant barriers likely to limit access by the HPSA area or population
- Demonstrate insufficient capacity
- Accept all patients, regardless of their ability to pay
- Provide services on a discounted fee schedule
- Have insufficient licensed professionals to meet the needs of clients

If you believe your organization meets these criteria, you should contact your State PCO immediately to determine the next steps in the application process.



**My organization does not fit under any of the practice settings listed. Are we still eligible for the NHSC LRP?**

This is one of the most common concerns for mental health and addictions services providers, and it can usually be easily resolved by contacting your State PCO. After describing your organization, they will determine under which practice setting you best qualify. Most community behavioral health organizations qualify as “clinic networks” in a mental health HPSA. In previous years, the application allowed sites to self-identify as a “rural” or “urban” site in a Mental Health HPSA, but the current application now requires sites to identify as one of the eight practice types in the [Basic Facts](#) section.

Note that FQHCs and Indian Health Service sites meet NHSC eligibility requirements and are NHSC approved sites. These sites do not need to complete an application or recertify.

**Can I work at more than one site?**

NHSC providers may divide their service between a maximum of four NHSC approved clinical practice sites. NHSC Loan Repayment Program (LRP) awardees should make sure that every site at which they will work to fulfill their service obligation is listed in their contract. This is an opportunity to recruit professionals interested in integrated care (i.e., behavioral health and primary care) who are employed in both a primary care and a behavioral health site.

**My organization may be eligible for the NHSC. Are our current employees eligible for the NHSC?**

If you employ any of the licensed providers listed in the [Basic Facts](#) section of this document, and these clinicians have qualifying unpaid educational loans, they may be eligible for the NHSC LRP. This is a valuable way to retain qualified health clinicians. Consider having a human resources representative discuss the NHSC LRP with prospective participants and offer administrative support to interested clinicians through the application process.

**To whom does my organization submit our application?**

[The NHSC uses an online site application.](#) You will submit your application and supporting documentation electronically. The application will be reviewed by the state PCO and, if recommended for approval, the NHSC will finalize the application.

**What types of educational loans qualify for the program?**

NHSC LRP participants will receive monies to be applied to the principal, interest, and related expenses of government (federal, state, or local) and commercial loans for undergraduate or graduate education obtained by the participant for school tuition and required fees, other reasonable educational expenses, and reasonable living expenses.

## **Where can clinicians find a job that qualifies for the NHSC LRP?**

Clinicians may find sites with current openings through the [NHSC Recruitment Site](#) (also referred to as the NHSC Job Opportunities List). While employment at an eligible site is a requirement to qualify for this program, it is not a guarantee of an award. However, please note that the limits on the number of health professionals per site have been raised significantly to allow many more clinicians to serve at the same site. If an eligible NHSC site is not advertising for a specific type of clinician, contact the site to explore their willingness to hire other eligible clinicians for NHSC LRP.

If the clinician is employed or seeking employment at a site not on the NHSC Recruitment Site, but is located in a federally-designated Mental Health HPSA, that site may still be eligible for NHSC LRP. In order to be eligible, the site needs to fill out the NHSC Site Application and request its LRP vacancies be added to the NHSC Recruitment Site. If the application is approved, the clinicians at that site would be eligible for the NHSC. Participants do not receive service credit for employment at an NHSC-approved site prior to the effective date of their NHSC LRP contract. The [NHSC application](#) has information about the criteria for consideration.

If the clinician is interested in employment at an underserved community site without a HPSA designation, the facility may be able to apply for one. For details, see HRSA's [Shortage Area](#) locator page. Once the site receives a HPSA designation for mental health, it will need to complete the online NHSC Site Application ([www.nhsc.hrsa.gov/communities/apply.htm](http://www.nhsc.hrsa.gov/communities/apply.htm)) to be eligible for NHSC assistance.

## **Are there service requirements for behavioral health clinicians participating in the NHSC LRP?**

For behavioral health clinicians (e.g., mental health and/or substance abuse providers) working full-time, at least 32 hours per week must be spent providing direct clinical services. At least 21 of these 32 hours per week must be spent providing direct patient counseling during normal office hours in an ambulatory outpatient setting at the approved NHSC site. Now, full-time clinicians can also receive partial credit for teaching. Up to 8 hours per week of teaching can count towards the 32 hours of direct clinical services. No more than 8 hours per week can be spent performing practice-related administrative activities. Supervision time cannot be counted under direct service. For persons who work at two sites, there is no stipulation on how many hours are spent at each site, just that the total number of hours equals 32.

For halftime clinicians, at least 16 hours per week must be spent providing direct clinical services. At least 11 of these 16 hours must be spent providing direct patient counseling during normal office hours in an ambulatory outpatient setting at the approved NHSC site. No more than 4 hours per week can be spent teaching or performing practice-related administrative activities. Supervision time cannot be counted under direct service.

## **What other loan repayment programs exist?**

In addition to the federally run NHSC LRP, HRSA provides matching funds directly to some states to operate their own loan repayment programs. Each state program is different, so visit the [HRSA State Loan Repayment Program](#) webpage for information about a specific state.

Please note that other federal agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, Federal Bureau of Prisons, or Indian Health Services administer their own loan repayment programs. Visit [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov) to explore all federal grant opportunities.

## **What is the 2011 deadline for the NHSC LRP application?**

NHSC LRP follows an annual application cycle that generally opens in the fall and closes in the spring. To be considered for funding in a given annual cycle, applications and supporting documents must be received by the spring of that year (go to the [NHSC website](#) to view the next application deadline).

## **RESOURCES**

Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) — <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/shortage/hpsapply.htm>

HRSA Health Professionals Shortage Area Locator —  
<http://datawarehouse.hrsa.gov/GeoAdvisor/ShortageDesignationAdvisor.aspx>

Indians Health Services Loan Repayment Program —  
[www.ihs.gov/JobCareerDevelop/DHPS/LRP/index.cfm](http://www.ihs.gov/JobCareerDevelop/DHPS/LRP/index.cfm)

National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare: NHSC Information Page —  
[www.thenationalcouncil.org/cs/public\\_policy/resources\\_and\\_issues/national\\_health\\_service\\_corps](http://www.thenationalcouncil.org/cs/public_policy/resources_and_issues/national_health_service_corps)

NHCS Site Application — [www.nhsc.hrsa.gov/communities/apply.htm](http://www.nhsc.hrsa.gov/communities/apply.htm)

NHSC Recruitment Site — <http://nhscjobs.hrsa.gov>

NHSC Sites/Communities Page — <http://nhsc.hrsa.gov/communities>

Public Service Loan Forgiveness — <http://www.finaid.org/loans/publicservice.phtml>

SAMHSA/HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions (CIHS) —  
[www.CenterforIntegratedHealthSolutions.org](http://www.CenterforIntegratedHealthSolutions.org)

State Loan Repayment Programs Contacts — <http://nhsc.hrsa.gov/loanrepayment/state.htm>

State Primary Care Offices — <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/Shortage/pcos.htm>

VA Loan Repayment Program — [www.va.gov/JOBS/Job\\_Benefits/continue\\_edu.asp](http://www.va.gov/JOBS/Job_Benefits/continue_edu.asp)