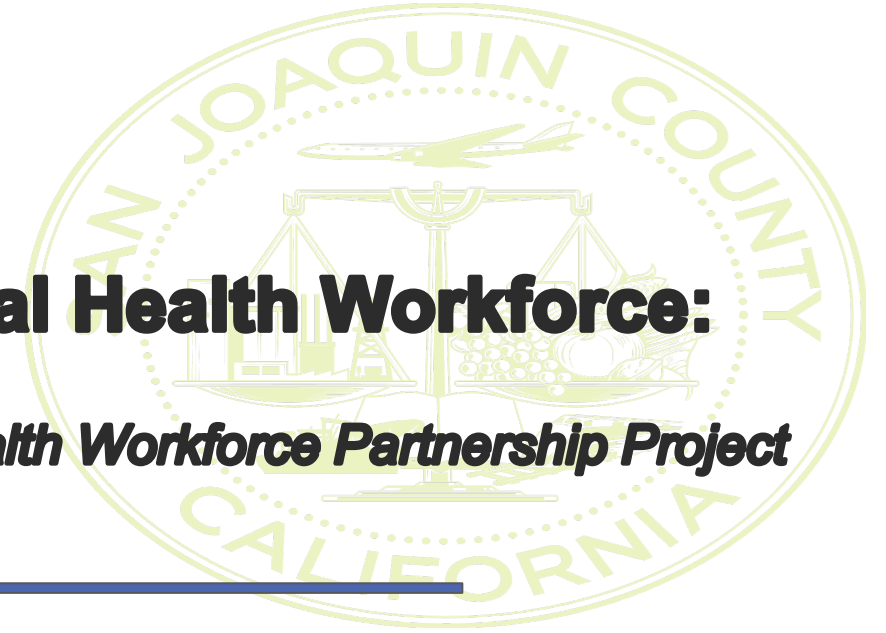


# **Strengthening California's Behavioral Health Workforce:**

## ***A Case Study on the San Joaquin County Behavioral Health Workforce Partnership Project***



---

Jillian Bledsoe, Business Analyst II, SJC-HCS  
September 3, 2025

# Executive Summary

California's behavioral health workforce shortage is solvable—and San Joaquin County offers a proven model. Through coordinated placements, expanded supervision, and targeted student support, the partnership reduced vacancies 61–70%, cut clinician caseloads 59%, and converted 81% of interns to hires by Year 2. These results are scalable and can strengthen access and equity statewide.



California is facing a **critical shortage of behavioral health professionals.**



Greatest impact felt in **underserved and rural areas.**



The **lack of statewide infrastructure** for coordinated clinical placements



**Insufficient supervision pathways** for Associate Clinical Social Workers (ASWs)



**Ineffective loan repayment incentives** have historically limited SJC ability to recruit, train, and retain a robust behavioral health workforce.

# Problem Statement

# Solutions

## **Internship & Practicum Expansion**

Collaborating with Stanislaus State and University of the Pacific, the project significantly increased local clinical training opportunities.

## **Supervision Capacity Building**

HealthForce Partners provided intern supervision on behalf of employers increasing placement capacity and ultimately expanding access to care.

## **Targeted Financial Incentives**

Stipends, retention bonuses, and scholarships address immediate financial barriers to participation.

## **Backbone Coordination Model**

HealthForce Partners convenes educational institutions, clinical sites, funders, and county agencies, aligning goals and managing implementation.

## **‘Grow Our Own’ Strategy**

The initiative prioritizes local talent, upskilling existing residents and current employees through accessible pathways to advanced degrees and licensure.

## **Regional Expansion Planning**

Active discussions with Stanislaus and Merced counties aim to establish a centralized regional clinical placement model, broadening impact.



**HealthForce Partners**  
CALIFORNIA

**HealthForce Partners**, a nonprofit organization **dedicated to strengthening the health workforce** through **regional collaboration and equitable access** to training.

This partnership aimed to **address long-standing barriers** and build a more **sustainable, representative behavioral health workforce** across the region.



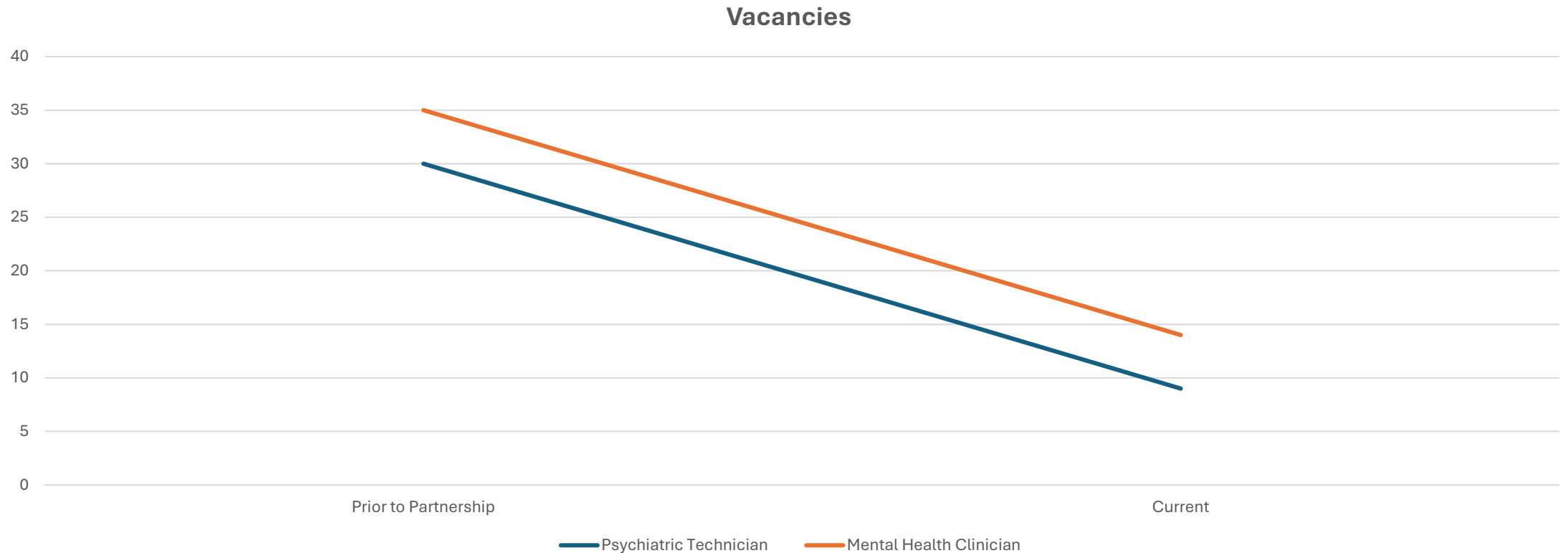
# Partnership Outcomes

# Vacancies & Retention

Mental Health Clinician Vacancy – 14 – 61% reduction

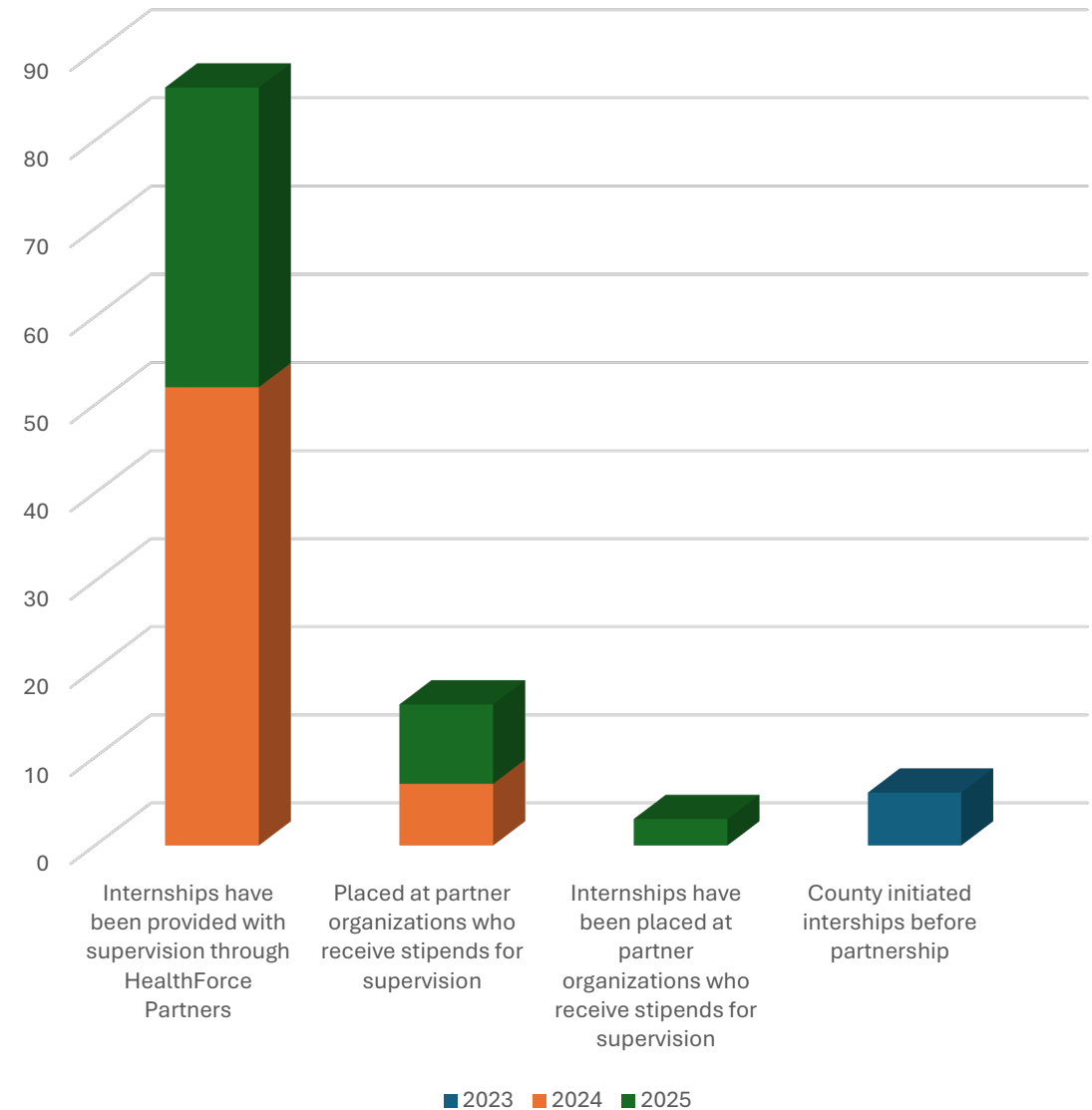
Psychiatric Technician Vacancy – 9 – 70% reduction

A retention bonus was awarded to 33 Psychiatric Technicians



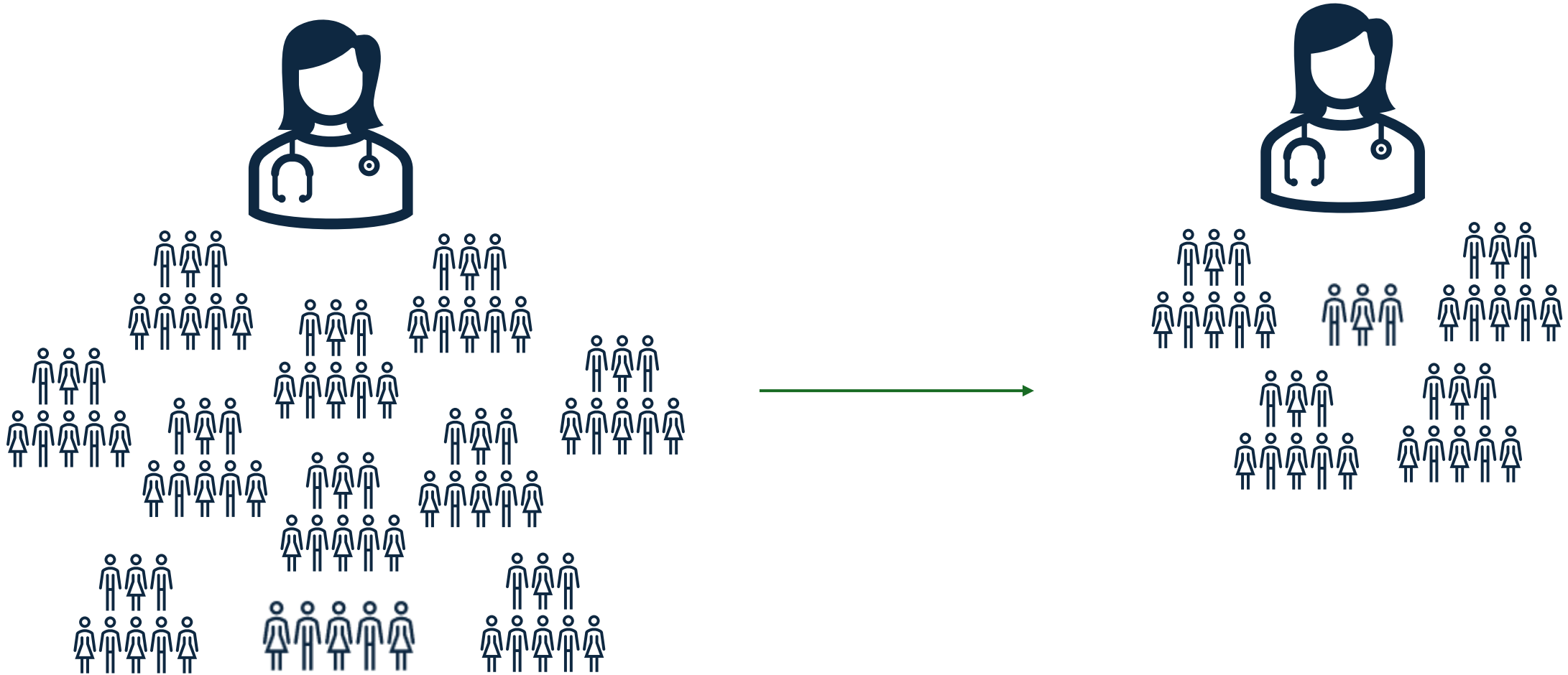
# Internships

- A **90% increase in paid internship opportunities** at BHS, total number of **current internships has reached 96**
- **12 community-based organizations** have hosted an intern to date. Many if not most do not have the capacity to accept interns without this program. Interns have served in Stockton, Lodi and Tracy so far.
- **Partner organizations** have hosted **interns with supervision stipends**
- Intern-to-hire conversion rates have been strong, with **46% of interns** hired in San Joaquin County in a behavioral health role after their first year and **81% hired after the second year**, demonstrating the program's effectiveness in building a job-ready workforce.





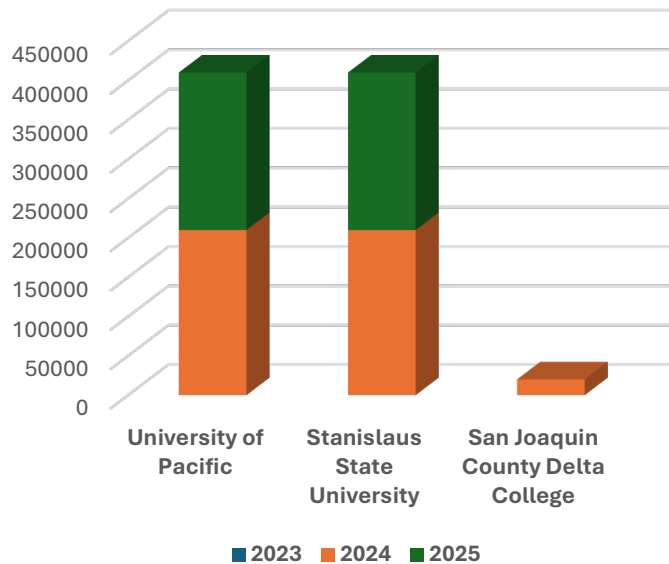
# Caseloads



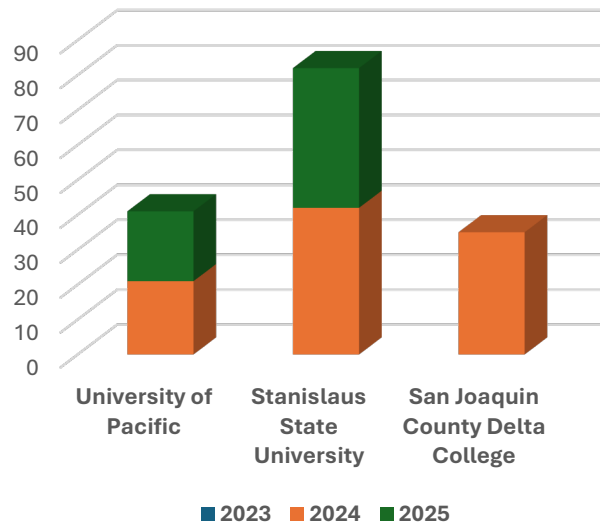
*Caseloads among providers have **decreased** significantly **by 59%**—from 85 to 35 members per clinician.*

# Scholarships

Scholarship Amount

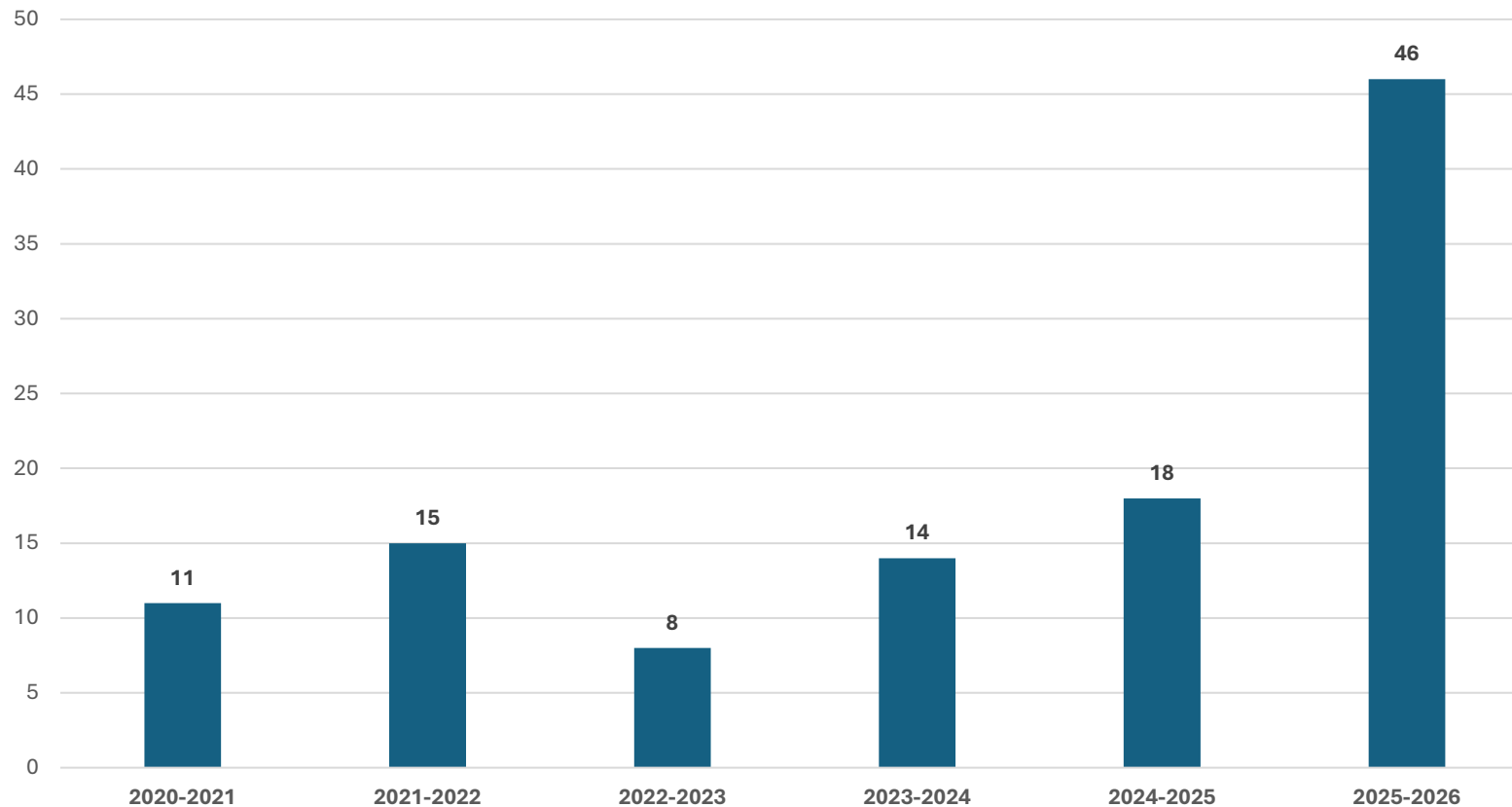


Number of Students Benefiting



- A total of **\$820,000 invested in scholarships** across Marriage and Family Therapy, Professional Clinical Counselor, and Social Work students
- **\$20,000** was awarded specifically to **Psychiatric Technician students at San Joaquin Delta College** to help cover essential uniform costs.

# Social Work Program Enrollments



*\*University of the Pacific's social work enrollment*

# Institutional Involvement



## **University Impact:**

The University of the Pacific social work program quadrupled enrollment over four years, largely due to guaranteed practicum placements funded by the program. The partnership's ability to provide additional placements in SJ County is key for successful student completion of clinical experience requirements.

## **Expanding Opportunities:**

Stanislaus State reinstated its Stockton-based MSW cohort, discontinued several years ago, citing the partnership's work providing internship placements in San Joaquin County as a key factor—creating new opportunities that directly serve residents.

## **City of Modesto Investment:**

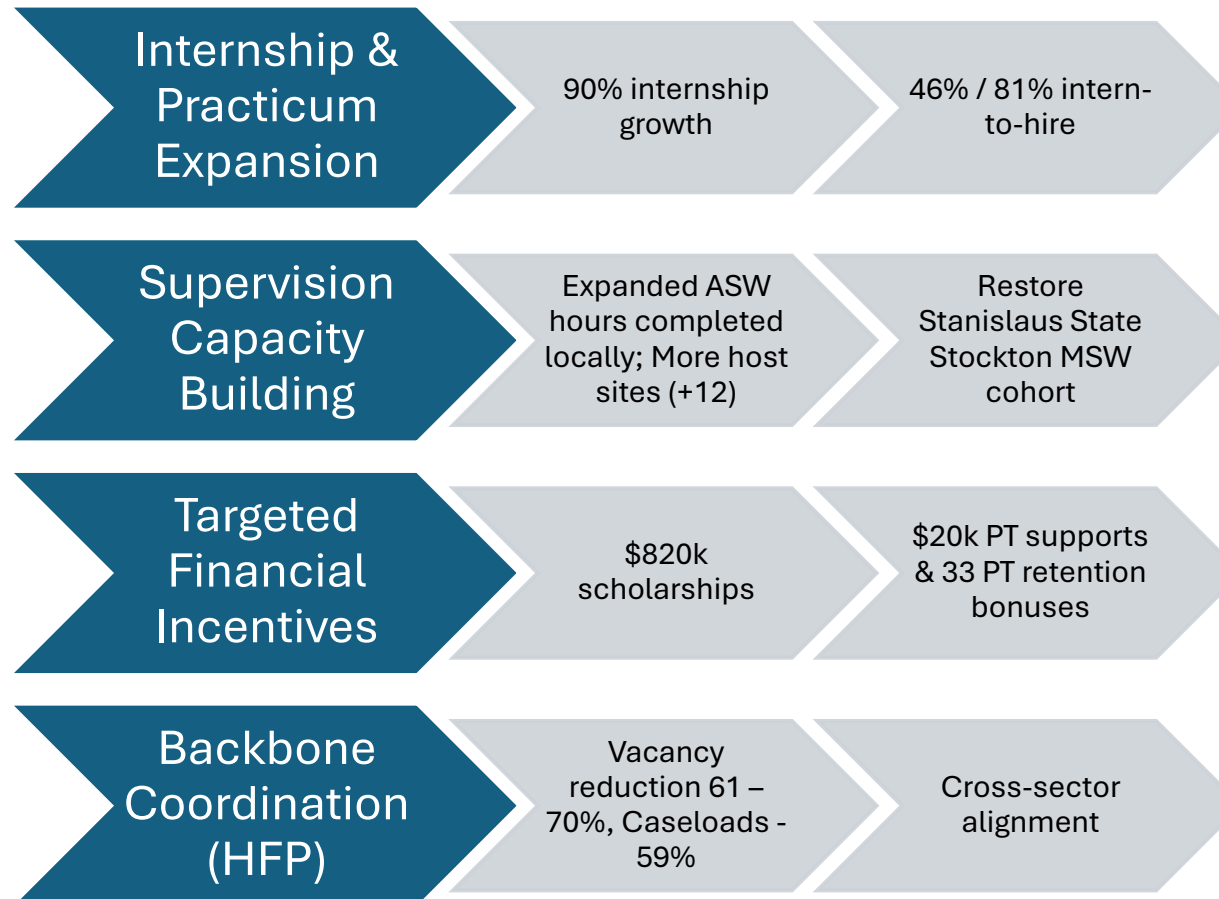
Inspired by San Joaquin's success metrics, Modesto directed local funds to support student stipends and supervision. This early adopter momentum helped expand practicum placements countywide.

## **Community Transformation:**

San Joaquin County Delta College's Psychiatric Technician program enrollment increased by 70%, growing from 20 to 34 students—demonstrating the impact of targeted interventions and financial incentives

# Summary

## Solution Components & Outcomes



# Stakeholder Testimonials



**Fay Vieira, SJC Interim BHS Director**

“Through our partnership with HealthForce Partners, SJC BHS has significantly reduced clinician vacancies—from 36 to 14—leading to care for families. By expanding practicum placements and working creatively beyond loan repayment incentives, we’ve strengthened our pipeline of culturally competent providers and improved faster, more frequent continuity of care in San Joaquin County.”



**Genevieve Valentine, SJC-HCS Director**

“The behavioral health workforce is vital to the health and well-being of our community. San Joaquin County is grateful for the collaboration with HealthForce Partners. This innovative partnership is not simply filling a workforce gap, but also positively impacts accessibility, care opportunities, and health outcomes.”



**Alfonso Apu, CMC-Chief Behavioral Health Officer**

“CMC is currently fully staffed with behavioral health clinicians as a product of our collaboration with HealthForce Partners. By being fully staffed we were able to provide timely unduplicated services to more than 12,000 individuals in our integrated centers and respond to more than 15,000 calls through our Mobile Community Response Program. This collaboration has assisted us in reinforcing our internal workforce development program by providing funding resources to incentivize internships and clinical supervisors.”



**Dr. Gerry Hinayon, SJDC-Director of Health Services**

“One family’s story captures the true impact of this partnership. The husband, once a laborer, completed the SJDC psychiatric technician program and now serves as a long-time SJC BHS psych tech, helping patients with acute mental illness reclaim their quality of life. His wife also became a psych tech, then advanced to earn her RN degree at SJDC and also works at a County healthcare facility. Their child followed the same path, graduating from the RN program and serving as an RN in the county. Thanks to the training opportunities at SJC BHS, healthcare has become this family’s shared calling and a lasting contribution to the community.”



**Lisa Lucchesi, SJDC-Dean**

"We are incredibly grateful to Healthforce Partners for their ongoing support of our Psychiatric Technician program. Their investment has helped remove barriers for students, leading to higher retention and greater career readiness. Together, we're not only supporting individual success, we're building a stronger behavioral health workforce in San Joaquin County. This partnership has made a meaningful difference, with graduates now working in local mental health facilities and giving back to their communities. Looking ahead, we're excited to continue this collaboration and expand its impact. Partnerships like this are essential for growing a skilled, compassionate workforce that meets the needs of our region."



**Britt Rios-Ellis, Stanislaus State University-President**

"At Stan State, our mission is to prepare graduates who not only excel in their fields but also uplift the communities they call home. Partnerships like ours with HealthForce Partners are essential to meeting the Central Valley's urgent healthcare needs. Through scholarships, paid internships, expanded clinical supervision and retention incentives, we are empowering our students — future nurses, social workers, counselors and therapists — to complete their education and step directly into roles that strengthen care and expand access. This is higher education at its best: cultivating local talent to transform health outcomes and create a healthier, hopeful future for all."



**Janae Reinhardt, CHS-Clinical Director**

"I see this collaboration continuing to influence the ability of behavioral health practitioners to obtain employment in the county and cities that they live in, so that they can make positive impacts in their own communities. The partnership has made it possible to have additional clinical interns on site which enables CHS to provide additional services and supports to our STRTP members. We have been able to implement various new group service offerings and provide our youth more safe and supportive adults to engage with."



**Nancy Zamora, CSU Stanislaus - Practicum Ed. Director**

"The partnership we hold with San Joaquin County Behavioral Health and HealthForce Partnership has become a cornerstone of support and opportunity for the professional growth of our Master of Social Work (MSW) students at CSU Stanislaus. HealthForce Partners has played a key role in our MSW Practicum Education Program by providing high-quality supervision and increasing access to a diverse range of behavioral health service programs throughout San Joaquin County. Under the guidance of experienced professionals, our students gain hands-on experience and develop critical social work skills in real-world settings throughout behavioral health service programs in San Joaquin County. "



**Nicoleta Bugnariu, University of the Pacific - Dean**

“As the collaboration continues to expand, with the support of HFP, our social work department has been able to expand our offering of financial support to students from marginalized and underserved areas, as many of these students are often part of these communities. The representation of behavioral health clinicians coming from the communities they are serving is invaluable. We are excited to continue expanding scholarship opportunities and support for Pacific’s MSW students to deepen health equity and leadership across San Joaquin County. Through the support of HFP, we can continue to shape a community-rooted behavioral health workforce for adults and families in San Joaquin County.”



**Paul Lanning, HealthForce Partners-CEO**

Our progress shows what’s possible when educators, employers, and communities work together with a shared purpose. Behind every partnership is a student who can finish their degree, a clinician who chooses to stay and serve locally, and a family who finally receives the care they need. This is the impact we’re building on - not just filling positions, but creating sustainable pathways that strengthen California’s healthcare system and the communities it serves. As workforce demands continue to evolve, our charge is to demonstrate that regional, access-oriented models of collaboration can be scaled and replicated statewide to ensure long-term resilience in healthcare.”



# Intern Profiles



Amaya Armas is a first-year MSW student in the 16-month accelerated program at University of the Pacific. A longtime resident of San Joaquin County, she spent 19 years in Tracy before moving to Stockton four years ago. "I've developed a strong understanding of the community and its unique challenges," she shares. Amaya's goal is to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and serve individuals and families in need.

Amaya chose her internship placements with intention, seeking opportunities that will prepare her for a clinical career. "I want to challenge myself and build strong critical thinking skills," she says. "This internship gives me the chance to apply what I've learned in class to real-world scenarios."

***Amaya Armas***



Maurice Troy Peoples, Jr. will graduate in December with a master's degree in social work from University of the Pacific, where he also earned his bachelor's degrees in psychology and philosophy. A proud Stockton resident, he is deeply committed to giving back to his community, particularly by supporting youth. As a U.S. Air Force veteran, he also hopes to work with fellow veterans in the future.

His passion for helping others led him to social work, a profession he sees as both a calling and a responsibility. "Witnessing the struggles and resilience of people in my community further motivated me," he explains. "I want to be part of the solution and help individuals navigate their circumstances with dignity and hope."

***Maurice Troy Peoples, Jr.***



Currently in his second trimester of the MSW program at University of the Pacific, Thomas De Guzman is steadily progressing toward his goal of becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in a mental health setting. His career interests lie in psychotherapy and psychiatric inpatient care. Today, he brings his passion and commitment to San Joaquin County Behavioral Health Services, where he works as a mental health specialist in both the Crisis Stabilization Unit and the Psychiatric Health Facility.

Reflecting on his career shift, Thomas recounts that "working in laboratories for 5 years was a mundane field that I was not excited about. Once I started working for the County, I knew that I found my niche."

***Thomas De Guzman***

# Lessons Learned



## **Stipends outperform loan repayment programs**

Students are more receptive to financial support during their education than to post-graduation repayment programs, which are plentiful but underutilized—evident in San Joaquin County's low participation rates.



## **Supervision is a bottleneck**

Expanding supervision capacity for interns and ACSWs is essential to licensure pipeline completion.



## **Backbone coordination matters**

HealthForce Partners' role in aligning disparate partners, administering program benefits and providing inter supervision was critical to success.



## **Grow-your-own strategies work**

Requiring scholarship recipients to reside in the county helps ensure that interns with local ties remain in and serve their communities.



## **Data-driven approaches can significantly reduce workforce shortages**

The partnership's targeted focus on high-need classifications resulted in reductions in critical workforce vacancies.

# Call-To-Action



**Increasing the availability of practicum placements and qualified supervisors** to ensure students receive the hands-on experience they need to succeed.

**Expanding student cohorts** by working with educational institutions to increase program capacity and enrollment.

**Leveraging existing programs and partnerships** to advocate for greater institutional flexibility in accepting more students into behavioral health pathways.

**Encouraging student commitment to local employment** following their practicum, strengthening the long-term workforce pipeline in San Joaquin County.

**Expand eligibility for loan repayment support** to include BA level and other qualified providers.

**Invest in community-based pathways** by prioritizing programs that recruit locally and serve locally.

# Conclusion

Based on two years of evidence from the proof of concept, we recommend **continued regional collaboration** among behavioral health departments.

The role of an **intermediary partner** has proven **essential** as a convener and catalyst, effectively bridging institutional partners. With **sustained collaboration and investment**, this model can be scaled to serve additional communities and help **build a strong, community-anchored behavioral health workforce for the future.**