Building the Behavioral Health Workforce: A Regional Network Takes Shape

September 2026

At the August meeting of the San Diego & Imperial Counties Regional Consortium (SDI RC) Workforce Development Council (WDC), more than 110 regional partners came together to spotlight the Behavioral Health Apprenticeship Network (BHAN), a promising new workforce initiative to address one of the region's most pressing workforce needs.

Dr. Joseph Stark, SDI RC's Regional Apprenticeship Director, opened the session by highlighting why community colleges are essential to that work. Colleges provide the classroom instruction that complements on-the-job training while connecting apprenticeships to college credit, certificates and pathways toward licensure. They also reach a broad and diverse pool of adult learners and career-changers, while bringing years of employer relationships and infrastructure — including Strong Workforce Program funding — that can help broaden the behavioral health talent pipeline and scale new models quickly.

Those strengths are being put into practice through BHAN, a countywide, multi-employer registered apprenticeship hub developed through the ELEVATE Behavioral Health Workforce Fund, a five-year, $75 million investment from the County of San Diego. Through the network, SDI RC is working alongside the County of San Diego, Policy & Innovation Center, Trailhead Strategies, San Diego Workforce Partnership (SDWP), LAUNCH Apprenticeship Network, community colleges and behavioral health employers — including Episcopal Community Services (ECS) and McAlister Institute — to build a coordinated approach to growing the region's behavioral health workforce.

Natasha Cruz, Behavioral Health Apprenticeship Manager with the LAUNCH Apprenticeship Network, emphasized the significant workforce need driving BHAN. The region faces a shortage of more than 8,000 behavioral health professionals across 11 high-priority occupations, with an estimated 18,500 additional workers needed by 2027. All 58 California counties are projected to face shortages in every behavioral health role studied, and San Diego's behavioral health workforce turns over at a higher rate than the state average.

One year into development, the network is already beginning to grow, with four occupations registered with the U.S. Department of Labor as of August — substance use disorder counselor, community health worker, social and human services assistant, and certified wellness coach — along with five anchor employers with signed agreements and four community college education partners engaged, spanning online programs and every region of the county. There are already 19 registered apprentices, with a goal of 33 by the end of the year and 700 by June 2029.

Rather than asking every employer to build an apprenticeship program from scratch, the network creates shared infrastructure employers can plug into — while giving workers an opportunity to earn a paycheck, receive structured on-the-job training and mentorship, and work toward industry credentials.

That support extends beyond the apprenticeship itself. Tanitia Burks, Program Manager with the SDWP, highlighted how wraparound services — such as career navigation, supportive services and employer engagement — can help sustain apprentices from enrollment through credential completion.

For ECS, that support has included removing practical barriers for employees returning to school. When apprentices needed laptops, for example, SDWP helped provide them. Embrie Tapia, Chief Program Officer at ECS, also shared the organization's broader experience launching a substance use disorder counselor apprenticeship in January 2025, including lessons learned, challenges and next steps as the program continues to grow. ECS began by identifying interested employees, host sites and experienced counselors who could serve as mentors, then worked closely with SDWP and its education partner to support apprentices through the program.

Tapia shared that one participating employee was promoted during the apprenticeship and now leads one of ECS's largest outpatient substance use disorder programs — an example of how apprenticeship can support both individual career growth and an employer's existing workforce.

Together, the presentations underscored a shared message: apprenticeships can create more accessible, equitable pathways into behavioral health careers while helping employers build a pipeline around their hiring needs.

With fall community college cohorts and regional employer recruitment underway, BHAN is continuing to build momentum toward its next milestones. The next Regional Employer Committee meeting is scheduled for Nov. 4, followed by an ELEVATE event Nov. 10 featuring a signing ceremony recognizing BHAN's founding employers and new employers joining the network.

Learn more about BHAN or get involved by contacting natasha@launchapprenticeship.org.