



In April 2022, the Florida Board of Education approved a new Behavioral Health Technician Program, a first-of-its-kind secondary curriculum created and designed by the School District of Palm Beach County and offered statewide, to prepare high school students for employment immediately after graduation and set them on a path to lifelong careers. Long-term, the program aims to create a diverse and inclusive workforce pipeline and address the critical behavioral health professional shortage. According to data from Kaiser Family Foundation, Florida’s Health Professional Shortage Areas meet only 19% of the state’s mental health needs.

The Behavioral Health-Focused School Project Team that came together to develop the program was led by BeWellPBC and the School District of Palm Beach County’s Choice and Career Options and Behavioral and Mental Health Departments, and included Palm Beach County Youth Services Department, CareerSource Palm Beach County, United Way of Palm Beach County, the Florida Certification Board, and several other partners. Before creating the final curriculum, School District of Palm Beach County medical administrator, Dr. Miguel Benavente, and the project team conducted a two-year pilot from 2019-2021 comprised of 350 juniors and seniors from five high schools with high diversity and inclusion populations.

The state-approved course is designed for high school medical academies where juniors and seniors can choose to take the specialized curriculum once they have completed their general medical prerequisites. The course provides an integrated cross-trained foundation and practical experience in behavioral and social sciences with content including basic psychopharmacology, patient teaching and education, diseases and disorders, suicide prevention, and much more. What makes the rigorous curriculum unique is the inclusion of societal issues affecting behavioral health that can be customized to a school’s surrounding environment.

The curriculum is designed to provide the learning and experience necessary to pass the **Behavioral Health Technician (BHT) certification by the Florida Certification Board (FCB)**. This program is also unique for the FCB. A “provisional” BHT credential was created to allow eligible students to apply and achieve the first level of certification before age 18 and graduation from high school. Before graduating high school, students will have completed the coursework, taken the BHT certification exam, and begun working toward the required 1,500 field hours for the full certification. The provisional certification allows them to work in an entry level position as a Behavioral Health Technician upon graduation. Credential holders can continue the process to complete the certification requirements for full Behavioral Health Technician credential once they are 18 years old and complete their field hours.

CareerSource Palm Beach County has been an important partner for identifying internships where students can be placed for field work while in high school and full-time entry level positions upon graduation. Students will be prepared to support facilities such as group care homes and residential treatment centers, acting as floor staff, co-facilitating groups, and gaining meaningful experience as they explore the many job opportunities available in the field.

Palm Beach County Youth Services Department has already agreed to accept Behavioral Health Technician interns. “Hosting interns allows for the development of a needed workforce pipeline and creates career readiness for our youth,” said Tammy Fields, director of Palm Beach County Youth Services.

While the curriculum is available to all districts across the state, the School District of Palm Beach County estimates the program could benefit up to 6,000 students in 20 high school medical academy programs in their community. Beyond local impact on the workforce in the near future, the program provides a pipeline to university programs for advanced degrees, helping to overcome industry shortages for higher level positions.

“The most exciting thing is that this is a long-term solution,” said Lauren Zuchman, executive director of BeWellPBC. “Two years from now we will have a pool of people who can get jobs right away and are on the pathway to a lifelong career. Our task force was determined to build and fill the pipeline with diverse behavioral health professions we so desperately need locally and across the state. This program is the starting point for communities to develop their own professionals for generations to come.”

###

#### **About BeWellPBC**

BeWellPBC, launched in 2019, is a behavioral health and wellness initiative committed to supporting community solutions from the residents themselves while increasing and improving interagency coordination and alignment in Palm Beach County. Its unique model brings together community members directly impacted by behavioral health with foundations, government and nonprofit agencies, faith-based organizations, health care providers and the school district to create integrated, comprehensive solutions that are most responsive to the needs of every resident. For more information, visit [www.bewellpbc.org](http://www.bewellpbc.org).

#### **About the School District of Palm Beach County (SDPBC) Department of Behavioral and Mental Health**

Guided by Legislation and supported by Strong Schools...Strong Communities referendum, the Department of Behavioral and Mental Health was created by SDPBC in 2019 to increase mental health awareness and expand access to mental health support for all students. The referendum dollars directly support additional behavioral and mental health professionals on every school campus.

#### **About Palm Beach County Youth Services**

Palm Beach County Youth Services Department is a department of the Palm Beach County government established by the Board of County Commissioners in 2015 to empower youth and families to realize their full **potential** and be the driving force of a thriving community. The Department provides direct behavioral health services in addition to providing funding for families and community agencies serving the needs of youth and families in the community.

**About United Way of Palm Beach County:** For more than 90 years, United Way of Palm Beach County has been the local leader dedicated to identifying and addressing critical community issues to improve the lives of our residents. We champion community change by strategically uniting key stakeholders and community leaders and investing in successful, sustainable nonprofits. United Way funds 110 local programs and initiatives that provide lasting solutions and measurable results – from increasing graduation rates and supporting literacy to ensuring financial independence, promoting healthy lifestyles, and ending hunger. When you support United Way of Palm Beach County, you are strengthening your community. To learn more, call (561) 375-6600 or visit [www.UnitedWayPBC.org](http://www.UnitedWayPBC.org).