



## Behavioral Health System for Future Generations Commission



Recommendation for  
Consideration

The Behavioral Health System for Future Generations (BHSFG) Commission proposes the following recommendation for consideration: **Funding to Launch Occupational Therapy Doctorate and Physician Assistant Programs.**

### Problem Statement

Physicians Assistants (PAs) and Occupational Therapists (OT) fill critical roles in Montana's behavioral health (BH) and developmental disability (DD) continuum of care. In rural areas where there are shortages of physicians and other behavioral health professionals, PAs often function in primary care roles, making them critical points in functional integrated behavioral health models and often the only providers in rural communities.

Occupational Therapists also play a critical role in Montana's BH and DD continuum of care. The role of OTs as important providers for BH and DD prevention and treatment services is also recognized by the SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services), which in 2015 included OTs as approved providers in [Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics](#). There is [substantial evidence](#) establishing the positive impact OTs can have in in-patient, community, and school setting for adults with mental illness, developmental disabilities, addiction, and other BH and DD challenges as well as for children in community or school settings. To enhance BH and DD services, Montana is one of only eight states in the nation to include OTs in the state's definition of qualified mental health providers.

Montana has critical workforce shortages of both OTs and PAs, in large part due to a lack of affordable, accessible degree programs in these fields. According to a 2022 Montana Department of Labor and Industry Report, Montana is in critical need of more Physician Assistants and Occupational Therapists. The report estimates that up to 67 Physician Assistants are needed each year to fill the state's current shortages and only half that number of individuals graduate from Montana programs each year. While Governor Gianforte's passage of a law in 2023 to authorize the independent practice of PAs bolsters the potential of PAs to positively impact the BH workforce, this law may also increase the demand for this profession beyond the 2022 estimate. The same DLI report estimates that the state needs about 33 Occupational Therapists added to Montana's workforce annually to meet demand.

The University of Montana has been laying the groundwork for an Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) program for years and with an influx of one-time funding from the Commission to cover start-up costs, can begin accepting students in Fall 2025. The OTD program will graduate approximately 33 students each year starting in Spring 2028, which will help address critical statewide workforce shortages. This NTI



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can also help UM launch a Physician Assistant (PA) program in the Fall 2026 semester. This program will graduate a minimum of 25 Physician Assistants per year, which will address more than one-third of the shortages identified by the Montana Department of Labor and Industry.

Currently, there is only one Physician Assistant program in the entire state at Rocky Mountain College (Rocky) in Billings, MT. Rocky's current program graduates 36 students per year, and according to DLI, 40% of these graduates leave the state after completing a degree. Montana needs a public PA program option to meet projected state workforce demand.

Furthermore, tuition costs at private institutions are prohibitive for many Montanans. Total program tuition costs at Rocky Mountain College are \$119k for the PA program, and \$115k for tuition and fees for the OTD. This is prohibitively expensive for many Montanans. By comparison, the University of Montana's present projections are \$28k for total program tuition for the PA program and \$35k for tuition and fees in the OTD program. The cost of private tuition and related student debt burdens also make it less likely that graduates will seek careers in the settings where there is greatest BH and DD support needs for adults and children. Therefore, Montana needs a PA and OTD program at a public university.

Similarly, there is no public Occupational Therapy Doctoral program in the state. Montanans wanting to pursue OTD programs are required to enroll in higher-cost private programs or travel out of state to receive this critical training. The higher-cost, higher-debt private programs deter graduates from working in Montana's K-12 environment or in rural Montana, the places most in need of OTs.

This NTI includes funding to support start-up costs, largely to pay for salary and program development to receive accreditation, and the need for bridge funding to launch the programs before they receive tuition funding that will sustain these programs over the long run. \$3.1 million in one-time-only funds will provide UM the necessary resources to launch and maintain both programs until they are sustainable via tuition revenue. There is urgent need to enhance the BH workforce, and this NTI can help address that need in a timely manner.



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**Data and Information Sources**

| Source                                       | Link                 |   |
|--|----------------------|---|
| 2022 Montana Post-Secondary Workforce Report | <a href="#">LINK</a> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Estimated demand for up to 67 Physician Assistant graduates annually through 2030. Historically, Montana has educated 36 annually.</li> <li>• Estimated demand for up to 33 occupational therapy graduates annually through 2030. Until recently, Montana has had no Occupational Therapy programs.</li> </ul>   |
| UM Occupational Therapy Feasibility Study    | <a href="#">LINK</a> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2016 report identifying purpose of occupational therapy including supporting behavioral health needs and developmental disability support in adults and children.</li> <li>• Establishing workforce need for OTD program, alignment with UM’s academic mission, identifying possible student base and pipeline, and identifying strengths and opportunities for supervised clinical experiences in Montana.</li> </ul> |
| OPI Critical Quality Educator Shortages      | <a href="#">LINK</a> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most recent report (January 2023) identified 7 occupational therapy positions in Montana schools that have either had severely limited candidate pools or that have gone unfilled despite recruitment.</li> </ul>  |
| Montana DLI Licensure Data Dashboard         | <a href="#">LINK</a> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2022, 7 Montana counties had no licensed Physician Assistants.</li> <li>• In 2022, 12 Montana counties had no licensed occupational therapist.</li> </ul>   |



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Provide one-time funding to support start-up costs for Physician Assistant and Occupational Therapy Doctorate Programs at the University of Montana College of Health. The funding will allow UM to launch each program within the next two years to address important behavioral health and developmental disability workforce shortage gaps in rural Montana communities. Following this funding, these programs will be sustainable in the long run when they receive tuition revenue.

| Place in Continuum<br>(Projected May, 2024)                | BHSFG Priority Alignment  | Projected Cost |
|--|---|----------------|
| Prevention<br>Crisis Intervention<br>Treatment<br>Recovery | Adult Behavioral Health<br>Children’s Mental Health<br>Developmental Disabilities | Up to \$3.2M   |

| Impact  |   |
|---|---|
| Outcomes and Outputs  | Implementation Activities and Milestones  |
| <p><i>Target Outputs</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase the number of Physician Assistants in Montana’s healthcare infrastructure by graduating a minimum of 25 Physician Assistants per academic year.</li> <li>2. Increase the number of Occupational Therapists in Montana’s K-12 schools systems and community settings by graduating a minimum of 30 Occupational Therapists per year.</li> <li>3. Increase the number of OTDs and PA who complete clinical practicum experiences in state. Outreach to-date has led to 103 letters of intent for clinical sites agreeing to host OTD students for their level II</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Receive detailed proposal from University of Montana outlining the intended OTD and PA programs.</li> <li>2. Engage in the appropriate procurement contract modes to establish a formal working relationship with the University of Montana.</li> <li>3. The OTD program is set to begin accepting students in fall 2025 as it has already gained accreditation status and will be revenue neutral by FY 26.</li> <li>4. The PA program will work to first establish accreditation and will then plan to start enrolling students in the fall of 2026.</li> </ol> |



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clinical experiences. This includes 59 separate sites across the state/region including rural and frontier areas as well as tribal communities (41 distinct placements for summer session and 62 placements for fall session). Settings are diverse and include those that demonstrate high need and/or low socio-economic status.

*Target Outcomes:*

1. Expand the number of Physician Assistants (with an emphasis on primary care providers) in Montana – especially at rural Critical Access Hospitals.
2. Reduce the barriers and travel times for rural Montanans seeking behavioral health treatment by increasing the supply of Physician Assistants working in rural healthcare systems.
3. Expanding the volume of Physician Assistants and Occupational Therapists in Montana will increase access to care in underserved areas, in a variety of practice settings. Of critical importance, occupational therapists will be available for employment in the K-12 environment for early intervention and prevention.
4. With a lack of crisis intervention in many rural Montana communities, a higher volume of Physician Assistant in Montana's rural and frontier communities will provide an additional layer of behavioral health support to state residents.



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| <p>5. With increased access to quality, affordable training options in-state, more Montana residents will pursue PA and OTD paths and be more likely to practice in-state.</p> |  |
|--|--|

Supporting Material: Example Program Budget\*

|   | Number of grants | Funding Distributed | Total                               |
|---|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Physician Assistant Program start-up funding            | 1                | One-Time            | \$2,125,324                         |
| Occupational Therapy Doctorate Program start-up funding | 1                | One-Time            | \$1,048,877                         |
|   |                  |                     | <b>Total:</b><br><b>\$3,174,201</b> |

The Occupational Therapy Doctorate program has already received accreditation, which means with this start up grant, they will be able to begin enrolling students as soon as the fall of 2025. The program will be revenue neutral by FY 2026. This one-time grant will cover all start up and administrative costs the University of Montana will need to undertake before the program will be revenue neutral.

The PA program will need to receive accreditation before it begin enrolling students, so it will be able to enroll students as soon as the fall of 2026. This one-time grant will cover all start up and administrative costs associated with the creation, development, and implementation of this course until it will be revenue neutral over the long run via tuition revenue.



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\*For example purposes only.

### *Supporting Material: Example Grant Criteria\**

The University of Montana will submit a detailed proposal to DPHHS outlining the specific requirements of the proposed course creation, including but not limited to:

- More information on the problem the programs would address;
- A budget breakdown by category and type of expense;
- A project timeline;
- Anticipated outcomes and outputs;
- A plan to oversee grant funds and project completion;
- A commitment to meeting all DPHHS reporting requirements;
- Sustainability and transition plans to manage the courses after BHSFG funds expire

\*For example purposes only.

### Oversight and Grant Management

BHDD staff will oversee the grant management and monitoring of grant deliverables. DPHHS will verify that grantee(s) meets service requirements.

Provider organization will be required to:

- Track activities;
- Monitor outcomes through administering surveys to members served and other activities;
- Report individual members served; and
- Provide data (including reporting related to outcomes and outputs).

The University of Montana will oversee the successful implementation of both the PA and OTD programs by:

1. Conducting annual academic program reviews that will examine the expenditures of both programs.
2. Receiving accreditation by reputable accreditation body prior to enrolling students to ensure long-term program sustainability.
3. Submitting relevant information to the Montana Board of Regents – an independent governing body appointed by the Governor and approved by the Montana Senate – to ensure the Board of Regents reviews all program details in a regular cadence.