

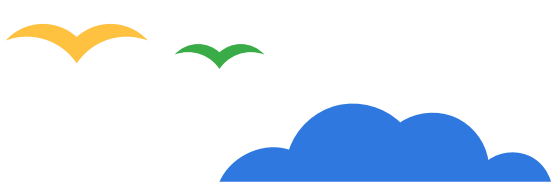


# 2026 Behavioral Health

## Recruitment & Branding Trends Report



# Why This Report Matters



**The behavioral health landscape** in 2026 continues to present a complex web of systemic pressures, marked by persistent workforce shortages and growing anxiety over funding stability.



While the dedication of community health organizations remains unwavering, mission-driven work is no longer enough to win the intense battle for qualified talent. Additionally, in a highly competitive marketplace, a clear branding strategy and a culture-forward recruitment approach matter more than ever before. Organizations must elevate their visibility to attract top talent and secure their financial footing.

To help leaders navigate these turbulent times, A-Train and **mhca** collaborated to conduct a comprehensive, confidential national survey in March and April 2026. This research gathered direct insights from chief executive officers, marketing directors, and talent acquisition leaders across the United States.

The resulting data provides a clear window into current industry shifts, operational struggles, and emerging strategic opportunities. This report highlights key findings from your peers and outlines actionable recommendations to strengthen your brand, stabilize your workforce, and protect your organization from compliance risks.



# Executive Summary

## Top Insights

- Organizations are experiencing intense competition for licensed clinicians and are struggling to attract younger generations.
- A significant disconnect exists between high organizational confidence in website compliance and the actual, audited reality of widespread digital accessibility and privacy vulnerabilities.

## Biggest Shifts From 2025

- The most notable change is the rise of funding anxiety as the top operational hurdle, fueled by shifting economic and policy pressures.
- While organizations are increasingly dependent on grants and donations to sustain their budgets, targeted investment in donor campaigns has paradoxically decreased.
- The recruitment crisis has evolved from a general vacancy issue into a salary and branding war.

## Key Action Items

- Leaders must urgently audit their digital properties to resolve immediate HIPAA and ADA compliance risks that threaten both public funding and very costly ADA lawsuits.
- To combat staffing shortages, organizations must move beyond traditional job boards, building distinct employer brands and early academic partnerships.
- Tracking marketing analytics is essential to optimize outreach, defend market share, and counter the actions of for-profit competitors.

**This national survey** reveals how top behavioral health executives are adapting their marketing, compliance, and recruitment strategies to overcome severe economic pressures and secure long-term community impact.

# What's Changed in Behavioral Health Marketing and Recruitment in 2026



**Funding challenges** have replaced **staffing shortages** as the top concern for behavioral health organizations.



Funding and strategy concerns are fueled by **economic and policy pressures**.



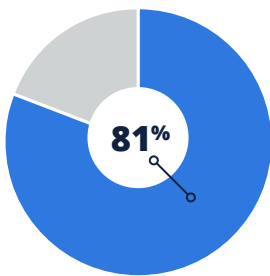
Despite mission-driven work, behavioral health organizations are **still losing talent** battles due to low visibility, unclear branding, and uncompetitive compensation.



Many behavioral health organizations are unsure about the results of their **marketing and communications efforts**.



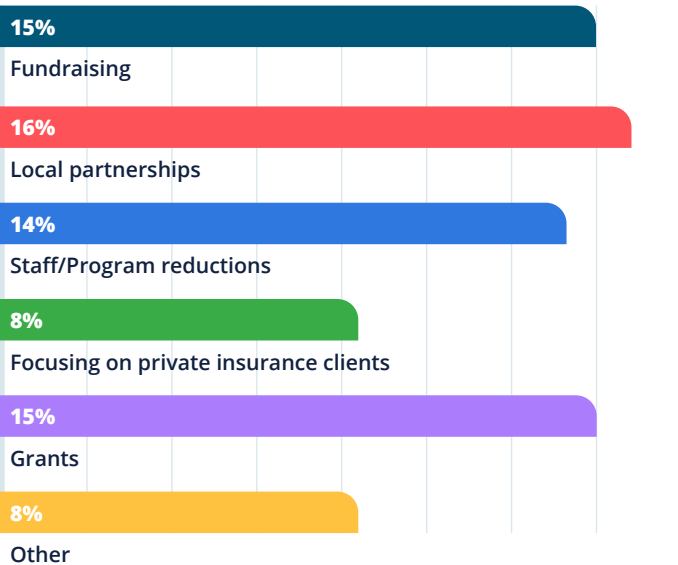
# Funding Uncertainty is Shifting Behavioral Health



**81%** of respondents cited funding and revenue stability as a **top concern in 2026**

Due to these **funding shortfalls**, leaders are considering a wide array of steps to maintain continuity:

How are you planning to address funding shortfalls?

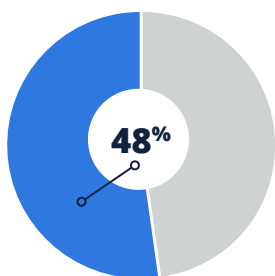


**Top three ways** organizations plan to address funding shortfalls:

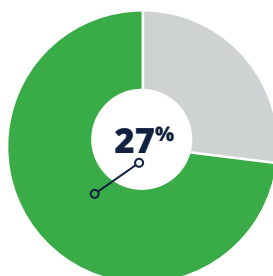
- 1 Local partnerships
- 2 Fundraising
- 3 Grants

# Funding Uncertainty is Shifting Behavioral Health (continued)

Organizations are planning to **rely more on donations and grants** for budgeting in 2026.



Unfortunately, **48%** of respondents are having to **consider staff and program reductions**—meaning the shortfalls previously feared have come to pass and will have a real impact on our communities.



A more innovative approach to funding shortfalls is shifting their services to serve a higher percentage of **privately insured individuals** to help balance the budget. A full **27%** of our participants are planning to use this strategy.



**Our top priority** this quarter is retaining funding and building non-grant-based revenue streams.

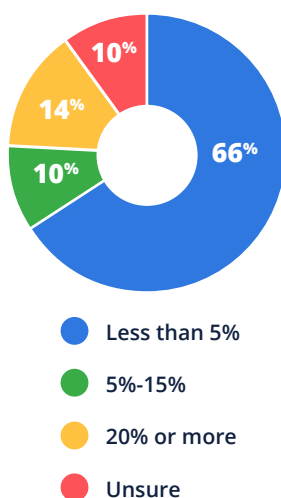


# Funding Uncertainty is Shifting Behavioral Health (continued)

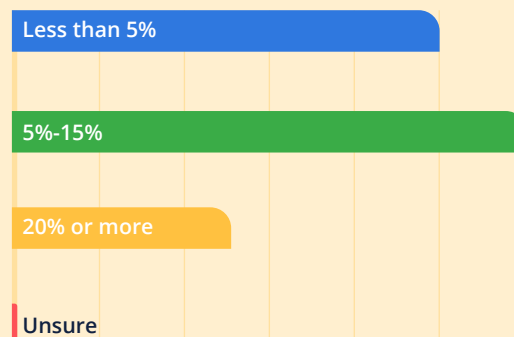


What percentage of your current budget is **generated by donations/grants**?

2025



2026



Despite this shift in funding sources, more organizations stated they were **not going to be investing in donor campaigns in 2026**—a surprisingly counterintuitive decision.

**31%** IN 2025 **VS** **44%** IN 2026

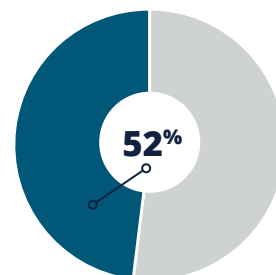
## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Funding uncertainty** is top of mind for behavioral health leaders.
- **Behavioral health leaders** are looking for ways to diversify their funding and ensure secure revenue streams.
- While many organizations must **consider reducing services/staff** to balance the budget, some are using more creative tactics, including focusing on private insurance clients.

- In 2026, behavioral health organizations are receiving more of their **current funding from grants and donations**. Still, fewer organizations are planning to invest in targeted donor campaigns. Given the current market and pressures, we believe it is crucial to engage with donors as an additional source of stable funding during uncertain times—despite the perceived financial cost of investing in donor campaigns.

# Workforce Woes Persist in 2026

What is your biggest challenge specifically with recruiting talent?



**52%** of organizations cite **"recruitment/staffing shortages"** as a top challenge.

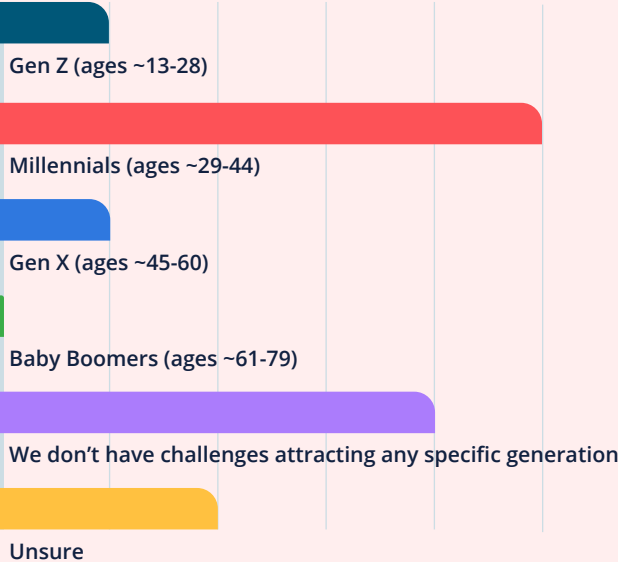
**Roles that are most difficult to fill remain:**

**Licensed  
Therapists  
/ Clinicians**  
(e.g., LCSW,  
LPC, LMFT)

**Substance Use  
Counselors and  
Nursing Staff**

# Workforce Woes Persist in 2026 (continued)

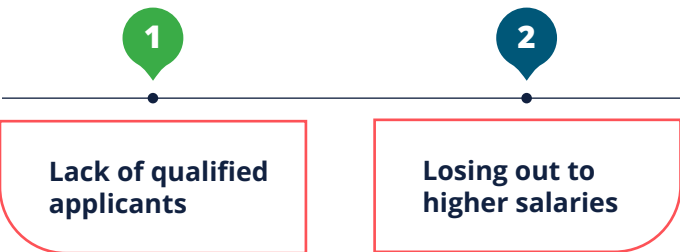
Which generation does our organization struggle the most to attract as team members?



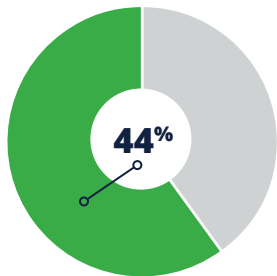
**The most difficult generation** to recruit remains Millennials, and this challenge seems to be getting worse, with CBHCs struggling to engage effectively with that audience.

**88% of organizations** say that their current recruitment environment is moderately competitive (48%) to very competitive (40%).

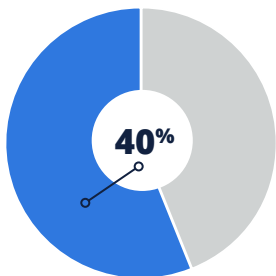
**The largest challenges in staffing are:**



## Retention in Focus



**Employee retention** was cited by **44%** of respondents as a top challenge.



**High turnover (40%)** and **culture misalignment** were noted as recruitment challenges.

When asked about their top priority for the quarter, many behavioral health leaders **called out retention.**



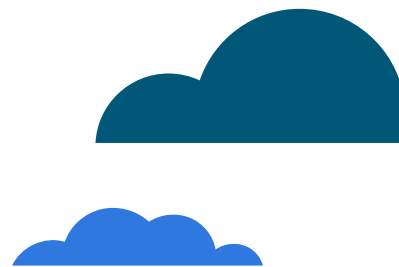
My overall top priority this quarter is to reduce turnover, increase retention, reduce vacancy rate.



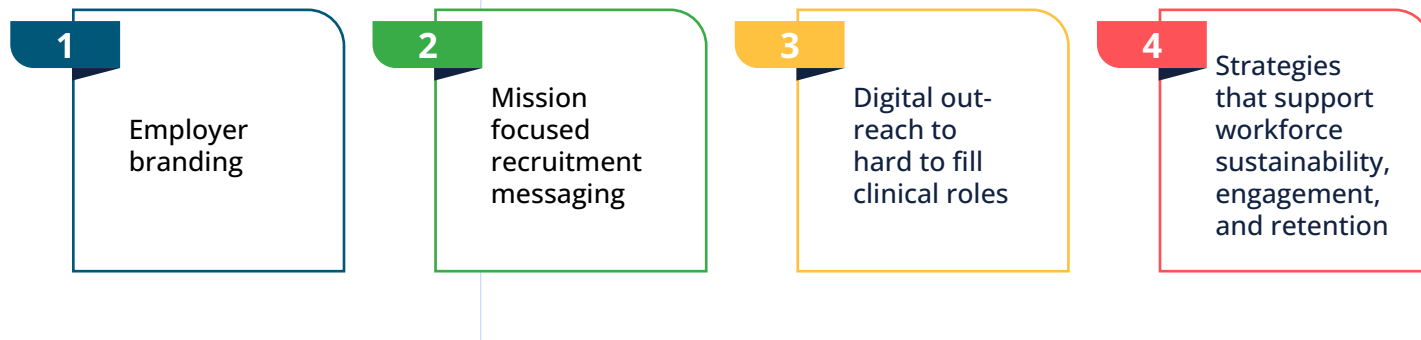
## Workforce Woes Persist in 2026 (continued)



We are interested in **learning more about recruitment tools and strategies** that help attract and retain behavioral health professionals in a highly competitive environment.



### Respondents were interested in:



### KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Despite mission-driven work**, behavioral health organizations are still losing talent battles due to low visibility, unclear branding, and uncompetitive compensation.
- **Heavy reliance on job boards and referrals** isn't enough. Organizations must activate a culture-forward employer brand across digital channels to stay competitive.
- **Partnering with academic institutions earlier** may help build awareness and loyalty while addressing the long-term hiring gap.

# Why Branding Matters



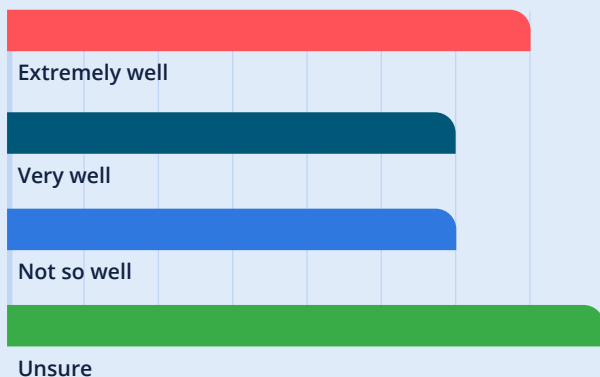
**How are you measuring** marketing and communications ROI?



Unfortunately, we are not formally measuring marketing and communications.



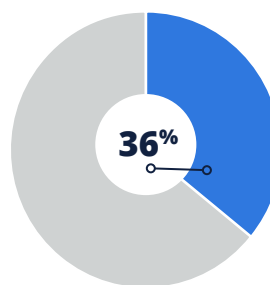
How well does your current recruitment reflect your company culture?



We aren't measuring ROI at this time.



Not well.



**36%** of respondents **noted challenges** or lack of tracking for marketing and communications ROI

**Branding is crucial** for both marketing and recruitment efforts.

**Respondents noted** that their branding is very central (59%) or somewhat central (26%) to their recruitment process.



Not consistently.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

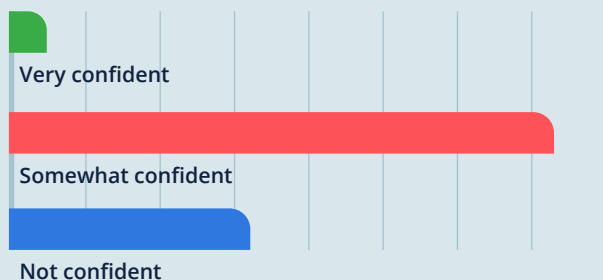
Many behavioral health organizations are **unsure about the results** of their marketing and communications efforts.

Organizations must **dig deeper into preliminary analytics** to understand audience needs and engagement preferences. Otherwise, they risk being out-manuevered by smaller, for-profit entities.

# What New Strategic Trends are Behavioral Health Organizations Excited About?

Behavioral health professionals cited an **interest in AI** for both recruitment and marketing purposes

How confident are you that your organization is prepared for client behavior shifts due to AI?



**Behavioral health professionals** are in the early stages of adopting these technologies into their workflows and are looking for more resources on these tools.

**Despite significant energy and focus** being spent on AI integrations, few organizations feel confident that they are prepared for client behavior shifts due to AI.

Focusing on local and university partnerships emerged as another trend.

We are interested in learning more about the use of AI to recruit and retain employees.

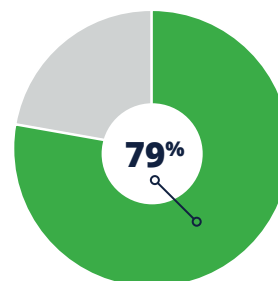
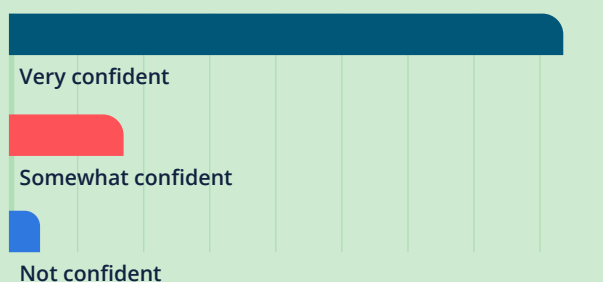
## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Behavioral health organizations are **curious about AI** and are looking for more guidance before implementing tools into their workflows.

Uncertainty in funding is resulting in an **increased emphasis on community** and especially university partnerships as a pathway for both staffing solutions and increased community engagement.

# HIPAA and ADA Compliance— Surprising Stats in the CBHC Space

How confident are you that your website is HIPAA and ADA compliant?



Respondents were very confident (**78%**) or somewhat confident (**15%**) that their websites were ADA and HIPAA compliant. However, **A-Train performed a manual check** of some survey participant organizations and found only 21% to be HIPAA and ADA compliant, with **79%** being noncompliant and risking their Medicaid funding.

This is particularly concerning this year as government entities seem to be looking for reasons to pull funding and this new ruling is going into effect.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Lack of compliance creates organizational risk.
- With increased compliance requirements, it is crucial for behavioral health organizations to check their websites regularly to ensure compliance and accessibility.
- While many respondents were confident in their adherence to these requirements, our manual check found confidence was not necessarily correlated with actual compliance.
- **Important note:** A-Train offers a free compliance audit for **mhca** members.

# Strategic Recommendations for Leaders



## Priorities for the next 12 months

- Immediate web compliance remediation must be your top operational priority.
- Leaders cannot afford to ignore the significant gap between perceptions and actual regulatory risk.
- Additionally, teams should immediately deploy foundational web analytics to avoid wasting marketing dollars and begin measuring the conversion rates of their talent recruitment campaigns.

## Recommendations based on findings

- We recommend you shift your recruitment mindset from passive job postings to active employer branding.
- Because competition for licensed clinicians is fierce, you must clearly define and communicate your unique workplace culture across all digital channels.
- Address the Millennial hiring deficit by modernizing your application process and tailoring your recruitment messaging directly to their professional values.

## Suggested investments

- We encourage allocating targeted funding toward professional donor cultivation campaigns to diversify your revenue mix.
- At the same time, invest in structured partnerships with regional universities, establishing formal pipelines that capture clinical talent before graduation.
- Finally, dedicate resources for exploratory AI training to safely improve operational efficiencies in both marketing and talent acquisition workflows.

## Areas needing urgent attention

- The 79% non-compliance rate among surveyed members demands prompt action.
- Leaving your public website uncorrected directly jeopardizes essential Medicaid revenue streams at a time when government entities are actively auditing funding requirements.
- Organizations must prioritize alternate funding sources and strategies amidst funding uncertainty.

# Building a Resilient Future for Behavioral Health Together



The findings in the 2026 Behavioral Health Recruitment & Branding Trends Report highlight deep structural shifts, but they also reveal a clear roadmap for forward-thinking leaders. By confronting funding volatility and recruitment roadblocks with proactive, data-driven strategies, community behavioral health centers can secure their market positions. Together, we can transform these operational pressures into powerful opportunities for institutional growth and deeper community service.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the chief executive officers, marketing directors, talent acquisition leaders, and others who participated in this research. Your openness and transparency made the gathering of this vital industry data possible.



While the current operational headwinds are undeniable, they are not insurmountable. Implementing a culture-forward brand strategy and establishing rigorous compliance protections will directly improve your recruitment success and ensure long-term stability.

## Get **FREE** Compliance and Competition Insights

Protect your organization and outmaneuver regional competition. A-Train is proud to offer **mhca** members a complimentary, expert digital compliance check alongside a customized local competition analysis.

Our team of experts will review your website for hidden HIPAA or ADA vulnerabilities and evaluate how aggressive, for-profit entities are targeting your local talent pool. Secure your vital public funding and strengthen your market presence today by claiming your free compliance and competition insights.

