



The USPHS Scientist Category: The Contributions of Psychologists to the USPHS Mission

Sponsored by the US Public Health Service Scientist Professional Advisory Committee

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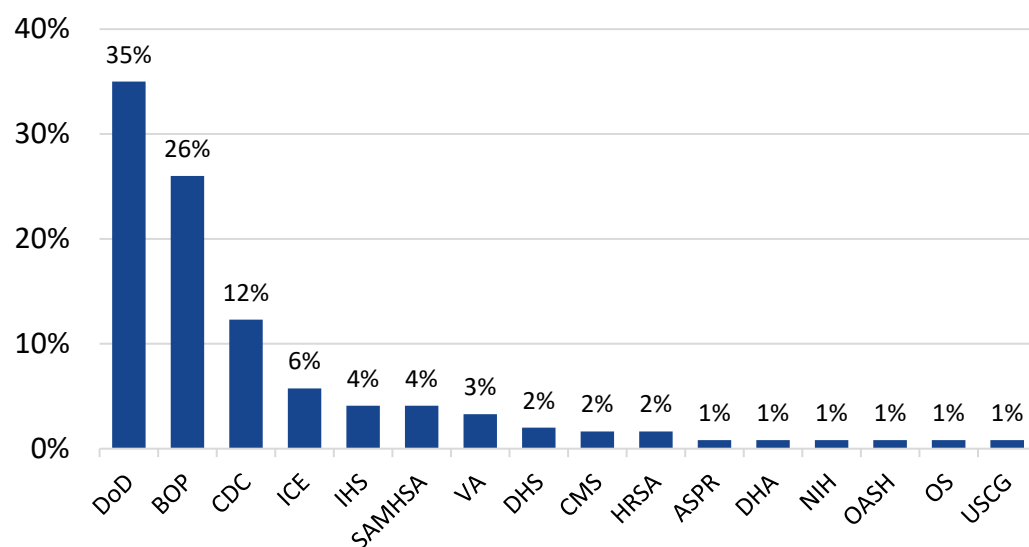
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BACKGROUND

- The U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Scientist Category was established in 1945 for doctoral-level officers with scientific training backgrounds
- Approximately 130 doctoral-level psychologists currently serve in the USPHS across 16 Agencies and Departments
- On July 1st, 2021, all active duty USPHS psychologists were integrated into the Scientist Category

Figure 1: Agencies & Departments PHS Psychologists Serve, 2021



METHODS

- The SciPAC Visibility Subcommittee collaborated with the Psychologist Integration Subcommittee in November-December 2021 to highlight the contribution of PHS psychologist officers to the Scientist Category
- A survey was emailed out to all 130 currently serving psychologist USPHS officers
- The survey included questions on officer rank, agency, time in service, professional role, participation in deployments, and experience during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Thirty-two psychologists responded to the survey for a response rate of 21%

SPOTLIGHT ON SELECTED USPHS PSYCHOLOGISTS SERVING IN THE USPHS SCIENTIST CATEGORY



Scientist: CDR Wade Keckler
Position: Senior Mental Health Executive
Assignment: Naval Hospital Pensacola, U.S. Navy
Duty Station: Myrtle Grove, FL
Officer Highlights: CDR Keckler has served in USPHS for 9 years. In his role as Senior Mental Health Executive at the Naval Hospital Pensacola, his main responsibilities include providing direct mental health care and overseeing health services across 17 clinics with behavioral health officers in the US Southeast region. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the senior leader for behavioral health services in the region, CDR Keckler set policies that strived to provide excellent and accessible patient care while providing maximum infection protection for his patients and staff. CDR Keckler showed great resilience in adapting his care as a mental health provider to various non-face-to-face patient care modalities. CDR Keckler has deployed 9 times with the PHS, 10 times with his agency as a PHS officer, as well as 2 times as an Army psychologist before joining PHS. CDR Keckler's training as an Army psychologist was invaluable as a foundation for deployments, emphasizing direct patient care in combination with understanding the importance of force health protection. Of CDR Keckler's 9 PHS deployments, 6 have involved formal leadership roles, 4 have included direct mental health care, and 4 have included force health protection roles.

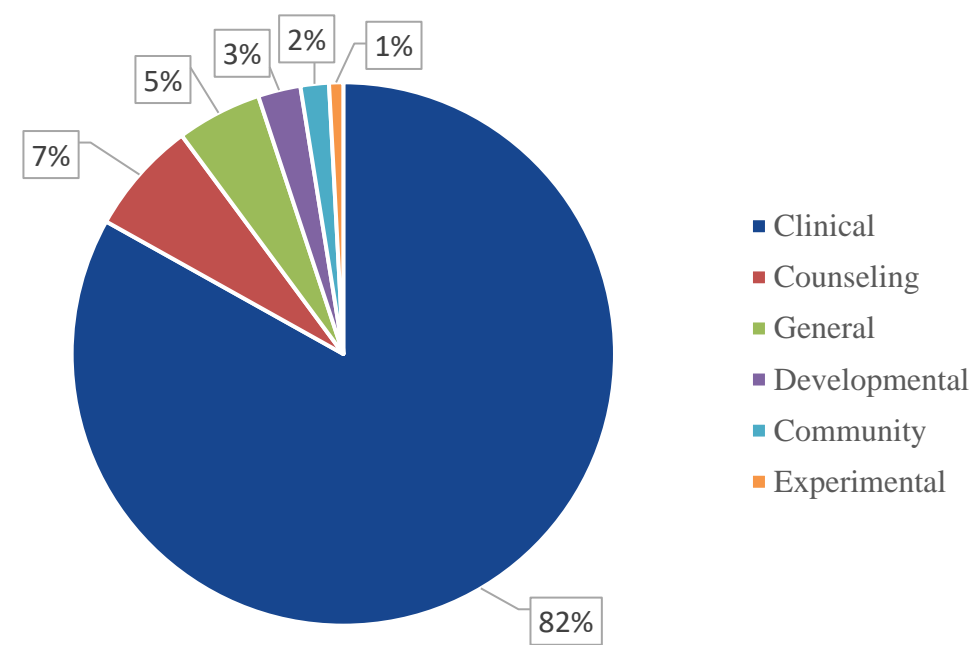


Scientist: LCDR Nicholas Buhr
Position: Course Supervisor/ Division Officer
Assignment: Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School, U.S. Navy
Duty Station: San Diego, CA
Officer Highlights: LCDR Buhr has served in USPHS for 5 years. As Course Supervisor/Division Officer at the Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School, LCDR Buhr's main responsibilities include the supervision of a full staff of instructors for 92 courses, 36 labs, and 6 exams each quarter. Throughout deployments that LCDR Buhr has led or supported, he utilized his counseling skills and engaged the deployed PHS officers and local health providers in group or individual counseling with a focus on building resiliency, managing high levels of distress or grief, and supporting mental well-being through crisis. Some of his deployments include: COVID-19 mission to March Air Reserve Base and Lackland Air Force Base quarantine sites as Public Information Officer and Case Manager; COVID-19 deployments to the Navajo Nation in Shiprock and Chinle as Mental Health Team Lead and Behavioral Health Force Protection; Operation Allies Welcome in Fort Dix as Officer in Charge of Federal Behavioral Health Response. At Fort Dix, LCDR Buhr utilized his abundant experience working in community and emergency mental health to create a system and process-flow for referral, treatment, and follow up services for dealing with mental health crisis such as suicidal thoughts, psychosis, and physical or domestic abuse.



Scientist: LT Elizabeth Johnson
Position: Clinical Psychologist
Assignment: Northern Arizona VA Healthcare System, Department of Veterans Affairs
Duty Station: Prescott, AZ
Officer Highlights: LT Johnson has served in USPHS for 3 years. As a clinical psychologist in the Department of Veterans Affairs, she supports primary mental health care integration for 18 teams across 11 clinics in Northern Arizona. LT Johnson's duties include providing initial screenings to determine the appropriate level of care for patients who require mental health services, providing direct virtual patient care, and supervising pre-doctoral psychology interns. Because the Northern Arizona VA is spread across 60,000 miles, providing virtual care to veterans during COVID-19 increased their access to integrated health services and lowered barriers to seeking behavioral health interventions and other mental health care. LT Johnson has also supported three PHS deployments during her time as an officer. She conducted case management during the repatriation of American citizens from Wuhan to Lackland Airforce Base, was a behavioral health consultant for the Unaccompanied Minors Mission to guide treatment plans for children needed mental health services, and served as a behavioral health psychologist in Baton Rouge General Hospital. Through all these experiences, LT Johnson has called upon her training as a psychologist to help ameliorate difficulties for both patients and fellow deployed officers.

Figure 2: Discipline for Qualifying Degree, PHS Psychologists, 2021



QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

- Survey respondents serve across 5 government departments and have rank from O-3 to O-6
- Respondents have served in USPHS for 1-29 years (average=7)
- 91% of respondents serve in a supervisory billet or position and oversee 2-100 staff (median=15)
- 72% provide direct patient care as part of work roles
- 69% transitioned to the Scientist Category in 2021 from HSO
- Respondents participated in 89 PHS deployments over 30 responses (average=2.8 per officer, range 0-10)
- Most common USPHS responses included COVID-19 (20 deployments), Hurricane Maria (12 deployments), and Unaccompanied Children/Minors (5 deployments)

OFFICER IMPACT AND CONCLUSIONS

- 100% of USPHS psychologist respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their work environment
- USPHS psychologists demonstrated great resilience during the pandemic in navigating institutional lockdowns, working longer hours, modifying clinical care settings, and increasing the use of telehealth technology
- Through their leadership and commitment to excellence in public health, USPHS psychologists will continue to play vital roles in USPHS and support the mission of USPHS to protect, promote, and advance the health and safety of the nation

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