The University of Illinois, in cooperation with the National Center for Rural Health Professions and the Illinois Area Health Education Center, was recently awarded a four-year, federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grant for workforce development in integrated care in Illinois.

Integrated care or integrated behavioral health brings Masters of Social Work (MSWs) and other behavior health clinicians onto inter-professional teams in rural health clinics, FQHCs, and critical access hospitals to address the biopsychosocial needs of patients and families.

The grant will fund IL BHWELL, which stands for the Illinois Behavioral Health Workforce Learning & Leadership scholars’ program. The IL BHWELL is a clinical certificate and scholarship program at the University of Illinois for MSW students who want to learn team-based models for integrating health and mental health services in primary care settings in rural and underserved areas.

Janet M. Liechty, PhD, LCSW, BHWELL Project Director/PI, Associate Professor School of Social Work, UIC College of Medicine, Carle-IL College of Medicine, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, authored the grant and her co-investigator is Michael Glasser, PhD, Director and Professor, National Center for Rural Health Professions, Illinois College of Medicine Rockford, University of Illinois. Hana Hinkle, MPH and Associate Director of the Illinois AHEC Network Program, is also partnering on the project.

BHWELL sites for the first cohort of 29 students will soon be determined, and scholarships will be awarded as soon as May of 2018.

“We are working closely with the School’s Social Work Field Education Office and the National Center for Rural Health Professions to identify and develop partnerships with primary care field placement sites and to offer ongoing training and support for inter-professional teams during the two-semester field placement,” said Dr. Liechty.

“The grant will provide scholarships to the winning students during their final two-semester BHWELL-approved field placement as part of the MSW degree program.

Scholars will learn and design strategies to promote rural population health and collaborate with community resource providers. The $10,000 scholarships will be awarded to the winning students during their final two-semester BHWELL-approved field placement as part of the MSW degree program.

Each year, 29 BHWELL scholars will be selected to receive additional training and a $10,000 scholarship. They will earn a certificate in Integrated Behavioral Health at the completion of this program.”

Critical access hospital leadership is encouraged to serve as pilot sites for this program, said Pat Schou, ICAHN Executive Director, who will also serve on the IL BHWELL’s Advisory Board. “If your hospital is seeking to enhance behavioral health and social service support, it would be beneficial for you to look into this program,” she added.

Innovative rural and community health clinics, rural and critical access hospitals and FQHCs that want to promote the integration of behavioral health and primary care, inter-professional training and team-based care models to achieve the Triple AIM are encouraged to participate in the IL BHWELL program.

Those interested in becoming a site or applying for the MSW program and the BHWELL scholarship can visit http://socialwork.illinois.edu/bhwell/ for more information. It is anticipated that 29 BHWELL scholars will be selected each year for the duration of the grant program.

Scholars will learn and design strategies to promote rural population health and collaborate with community resource providers. The $10,000 scholarships will be awarded to the winning students during their final two-semester BHWELL-approved field placement as part of the MSW degree program. The MSW degree can be completed on campus or in a hybrid, partially online format called IMSW that is tailored to the needs of outreach students who may live at a distance.

“We want to attract students who are passionate about serving patients and communities in rural areas,” said Dr. Liechty. “We also want to discover and build on work that is already being done in Illinois to promote integrated care.

“Critical access hospitals are important hubs of healthcare services and innovation in rural Illinois, and we know many are already implementing integrated behavioral health models,” she added.

“Likewise, rural health centers are moving toward integrated care and many are located within 30-50 minutes from cities such as Urbana-Champaign, Decatur, Danville, Springfield, Peoria, etc., which is a very reasonable commute. Also, FQHCs are usually eligible BHWELL sites, and they are located throughout both urban and rural areas in Illinois, so no matter where you are located in this state, there is opportunity to participate.”

To contact the BHWELL director and staff, email IL-BHWELL@illinois.edu. For more information and to join the BHWELL mailing list see http://socialwork.illinois.edu/bhwell. For more information about the benefits of integrated behavioral health and financing see the SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions at https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/.