Kern County Financial Records show how the Board of Supervisors has systematically shortchanged taxpayers - undermining our public safety, health, and quality of life.

For too long, Kern County taxpayers have been forced to put up with deteriorating County highways, a dangerously understaffed 911 call center, unacceptably high rates of homelessness and death from suicide and opioid overdose as well as death rates for children where abuse has been reported that are nearly three times the statewide average. A careful analysis of the County's official financial documents reveals that the County Board of Supervisors has presided over an administration that has systematically failed to deliver the levels of service that were promised in the County's own budget documents. Although residents and County workers have brought these problems to the attention of the Board of Supervisors for years, the practice has continued unabated. The only reasonable conclusion is that the Board of Supervisors is aware of their failure to deliver promised services and up to this point has been unwilling to provide the leadership necessary to address the situation. That is why County employees and residents are now calling on the Board of Supervisors to Fix Kern!

Systematic Short Staffing Hurts County Taxpayers

Kern County employees have told the Board of Supervisors that they are understaffed. There are not enough fully trained, qualified employees to provide the level of service that County taxpayers expect. County financial reports show a consistent pattern of spending far less than budgeted across nearly all departments year after year. Since payroll accounts for by far the largest share of County expenditures, this can only happen because the County spends less on employees than has been budgeted. This is the result of a combination of widespread short-staffing and high turnover. (The County pays new employees less than more experienced employees, so the County's high turnover lowers County costs. Unfortunately for County residents, high turnover often means lower quality and less efficient service as there is a long "learning curve" for many critical jobs. Excessive turnover also diminishes the productivity of senior employees who must spend time training and double-checking the work of new hires instead of being able to focus on their regular assignments.)

Actual Expenditures for County services fell short of budgeted amounts by $754,299,000 over the 4-year period July 1, 2020, thru June 30, 2024.

	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Budgeted Expenditures	$775,706,000	$1,039,233,000	$925,450,000	$1,088,550,000	$3,828,939,000
Actual Expenditures	$662,621,000	$732,410,000	$812,480,000	$867,129,000	$3,074,640,000
Amount by which Actual expenditures fell short of Budgeted Amount	$113,085,000	$306,823,000	$112,970,000	$221,421,000	$754,299,000
Reference	2021 CAFR p.87	2022 CAFR p.90	2023 CAFR p.94	2024 CAFR p.101	

A few examples illustrate a widespread problem of understaffing and turnover in critical positions. Chronic understaffing and high turnover contribute directly to the neglect of public safety and health detailed later in this report. In the month since this report was last updated, all ten classifications that were listed as examples remain seriously understaffed and the staffing levels for four of these have actually gotten worse, including three in the Public Works department.

			3/7/2025 data		4/4/2025 data		
Department/ Section	**Classification**	**Budgeted Positions**	**Filled Positions (total)**	**Under 1 year of service**	**Filled Positions (total)**	**Under 1 year of service**	**Trend**
Public Works							
	Heavy Equipment Mechanic	19	14		14	1	No improvement
	Highway Painter	19	16	6	13	5	Worse
	Maintenance Technician	45	34	3	33	3	Worse
	Maintenance Worker	164	147	41	145	41	Worse
Behavioral Health							
	BH Recovery Specialist	264	239	32	247	26	Improved but understaffed
	BH Therapist	181	151	21	146	14	Worse
	Clinical Psychologist	10	6		6		No Improvement
	Program Specialist	20	17		17		No Improvement
	Vocational Nurse	26	20	5	20	5	No Improvement
Sheriff's Dispatchers (911 Center)							
	Sheriff's Dispatcher*	40	30	6	31	7	Improved but understaffed

*The Board of Supervisors reduced the number of Dispatcher Assistant positions from 34 to 33 in the current budget. Current employees face excessive overtime leading to fatigue on the job.

Excessive vacancies and turnover are the direct result of the County's failure to pay competitive wages. Employees are voting with their feet.

For many positions, Kern's pay rates are not at the level required to attract and retain qualified employees. While Kern County does not compare pay rates with those offered by the private sector and neighboring Los Angeles County, the fact of the matter is that more and more workers are leaving for better-paying, less stressful jobs, in many cases telecommuting from their homes in Kern County. For County taxpayers, this means that they aren't getting the level of services they should. The County's administrators have reported extensively on the County's recruiting and retention issues, but the Board of Supervisors refuses to authorize the pay increases needed to address the problem. See Appendix A.

The Board of Supervisors doesn't need to raise taxes to make Kern a safer, healthier community – They already have the money they need.

Rather than use taxpayer dollars (including hundreds of millions they have received from the state and federal government) the Board of Supervisors has put over $878 million into "restricted funds." These funds, largely sourced from the state and federal government, have grown by over 474 million over the last 4 years reported.

 * **Note:** The restricted funds broken out in the chart above (Behavioral Health & Recovery Services, Local Revenue Fund (State 2011 Realignment funds), Human Services) are all funded primarily with funds from the State of California and some federal dollars. As such, the growth in these funds is directly attributable to the choice made by the Board of Supervisors <u>not</u> to deploy over $266 million in these funds alone over the last 4 years to meet the purposes for which they have been designated by the funding agencies. This despite the fact that the County has had more than sufficient reserves in these funds to meet contingencies for the entire period.

Restricted Funds Balances	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**	**Unspent funds <u>added</u> to Restricted Funds 2020-2024**
Behavioral Health & Recovery Services*	$120,710,000	$125,537,000	$153,737,000	$164,692,000	$187,971,000	**$67,261,000**
Local Revenue Fund (State 2011 Realignment funds)*	$47,249,000	$94,836,000	$119,888,000	$170,044,000	$193,184,000	**$145,935,000**
Human Services*	$20,367,000	$24,655,000	$58,050,000	$71,138,000	$73,952,000	**$53,585,000**
Total for selected funds* listed above	**$188,326,000**	**$245,028,000**	**$331,675,000**	**$405,874,000**	**$455,107,000**	**$266,781,000**
Total for all restricted funds	**$404,395,000**	**$577,080,000**	**$717,989,000**	**$851,340,000**	**$878,830,000**	**$474,435,000**
Reference	2020 CAFR pp. 82-83	2021 CAFR pp. 83-84	2022 CAFR p.85	2023 CAFR p.90	2024 CAFR p.97	

<u>Mid-Year Status Report (Issued February 20, 2025)</u>
The latest Mid-Year Status Report, shared publicly on February 20, 2025, confirms that the pattern of failing to make promised expenditures to provide needed service to County residents continues.

1. The report projects that by the end of the fiscal year (June 30, 2025) the net surplus in revenues over budget will be over $28 million.
2. The report projects that by the end of the fiscal year (June 30, 2025) the <u>net shortfall in spending by the County's 48 departments will be over $75 million *after accounting for anticipated shortfalls in departmental revenue from the amounts in the original budget*</u>.
3. This means there will be a projected net of over $100 million *additional surplus* at the end of the fiscal year over and above the $175 million designated to be added to reserves in the current budget.
4. The report lists 43 out of 48 departments that are projected to spend less than promised in the 2024-2025 budget.

Every day that the Board of Supervisors refuses to use the taxpayer funds it has received to make the necessary investments in highway maintenance, public safety, behavioral health, child protection and other vital services has a negative impact on our public safety, health, and quality of life. Here are a few glaring examples:

County roads in disrepair

Kern County's roads and highways are in an unacceptable state of disrepair. In 2024, Kern residents filed 73 claims against Kern County for personal injuries and property damage resulting from road maintenance and related issues. These included four fatalities and six severe injuries.

Type of Incident	**# Claims**	**# of Incidents**
Pothole	26	23
Insufficient lighting and/or signage	12	10
Broken/uneven sidewalk	11	10
Poorly designed and maintained road	6	4
Uneven road	4	4
Manhole	4	4
Defective traffic signals	4	3
Other	6	6
Total	**73**	**64**

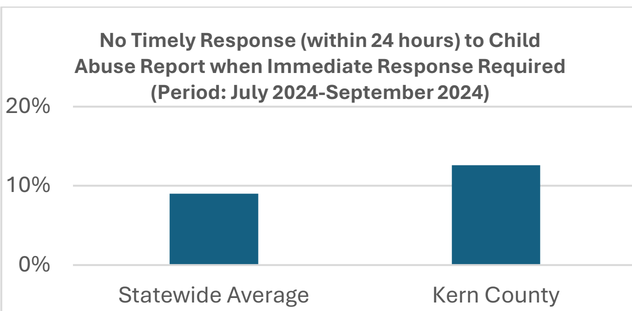
In 2024 a Grand Jury Report cited Kern County for failing to restripe road markings that are water-based paint with glass beads within their expected service life timeframe of between 6 months to 3 years. According to the Grand Jury Report, this is a serious safety issue because the glass beads wear off and the paint fades before the markings can be refreshed. properly implement The County's inability to hire and retain highway painters has a direct impact on this problem.

A Child Welfare System in Crisis

Children in Kern County are facing alarming risks under the County's child welfare system. Between 2020 and 2023, children with allegations of maltreatment were 288% more likely to die in Kern County than the statewide average. The figures below were provided by the California Department of Social Services in response to an information request made by SEIU 521.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	Average
Kern County					
Total Children	256,596	254,579	253,092	251,488	
Children with Maltreatment Allegations	13,413	13,168	14,099	14,154	13,708.5
Allegations per 100,000 Children	*5,227.3*	*5,172.5*	*5,570.7*	*5,628.1*	*5,399.6*
Child Welfare Cases - Deaths	19	18	12	11	15
Deaths per 100,000 Children	7.4	7.1	4.7	4.4	5.9
California					
Total Children	9,148,444	9,050,284	8,969,797	8,852,264	
Children with Maltreatment Allegations	390,929	416,464	440,856	433,759	420,502.0
Allegations per 100,000 Children	*4,273.2*	*4,601.7*	*4,914.9*	*4,900.0*	*4,672.4*
Child Welfare Cases - Deaths	158	182	170	132	161
Deaths per 100,000 Children	1.7	2.0	1.9	1.5	1.8

Kern child welfare employees report that reports of child abuse and neglect don't always get investigated as they should due to insufficient staffing. This is borne out by the data collected by the State of California that shows that for the most recent reporting period reports of abuse or neglect that require an immediate response were 40% more likely to not get a timely response than they were for California as a whole.



Mental Health Services Failing Those in Need

The lack of comprehensive mental health services in Kern County is a public safety crisis. Without proper support, individuals struggling with mental health issues are left vulnerable, contributing to an unsafe environment for everyone.

In 2023, the ratio of therapists to residents in Kern is 410:1 and in California it's 220:1, meaning Kern has 54% less access to therapist than the average Californian. [1]

Data from 2017-2021 shows that in Kern County, California, there were 13 deaths by suicide per 100,000 people. In California, there were 10 per 100,000. [2]

According to the California Department of Public Health there were 321 deaths due to opioid overdose in Kern in 2023 or 37.0 deaths per 100,000 in population. This compares with a statewide average of 20.8 deaths per 100,000. This means that in 2023, Kern's opioid death rate was 78% higher than the statewide average and that in 2023 alone 141 Kern residents who died would have lived if Kern's opioid death rate matched the statewide average.

[1] County Health Rankings, Kern County

[2] County Health Rankings, Kern County

Homelessness[3]

While mental health is not the only factor contributing to the homelessness crisis, it is certainly an important issue for many among our unsheltered population.

From 2022 to 2024, the number of homeless individuals in Kern County increased 67% from 1,603 to 2,669. Compared to 2022 and 2023, a higher percentage of the homeless population is unsheltered than sheltered.

It is in this context that the Board of Supervisor's failure to properly staff behavioral health services must be viewed. While the crisis has continued, the Board of Supervisors has continued to accumulate funds from state and federal sources in restricted funds that could be deployed to address these needs in our community. The Behavioral Health & Recovery Services fund stood at $188 million in the just released CAFR for year ending June 30, 2024. – an increase of over $67 million in unspent funds in just the last 4 years. The Local Revenue Fund (State of California 2011 Realignment funds) stood at over $193 million an increase of over $145 million in the same period. All these funds were available to address issues which are of great concern to every taxpayer in Kern County. It is time for the Board of Supervisors to take leadership and do what is necessary to Fix Kern!

[3] https://bkrhc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2024-PIT-Count-Report-Kern-County.pdf

Appendix A Kern County Administrators Call Attention to Recruitment and Retention Issues

While their statements do not fully reflect the breadth and depth of the County's recruitment and retention issues, the fact that senior administrators for the County make note of them is a strong indicator that the problem is very real.

1. The CAO's Mid-Year Status Report released on February 20, 2025, includes multiple references to the County's recruitment and retention issues.

    a. On page 20, the report on Child Support Services shows a projected underspend of $4.967 million for salaries and benefits. In the notes, the report states: ***"The department has not been able to fill positions as quickly as anticipated but remains committed to working with Human Resources to fill all funded and vacant positions."***

    b. On page 38, the report on Public Works shows a projected underspend of $5.268 million for salaries and benefits. In the notes, the report states: ***"Salary and Benefits costs are projected to be lower than budgeted due to higher than planned vacancies. Reduced personnel expenditures will also result in similar reductions to reimbursement revenue."*** The failure to recruit and retain qualified staff is actually hurting County revenue. The report goes on to say, ***"Although estimated personnel expenditures are lower than budgeted. total staffing levels are consistent with recent fiscal years. so, there is no relative reduction in service levels anticipated."*** This statement completely ignores the fact that the Public Works department has been understaffed for years – a major factor in the poor maintenance of Kern County Roads.

    c. On page 19 the report acknowledges that the District Attorney's Forensic Services department hopes to hire ***"up to three Criminalists and two Forensic Lab Technicians in the second half of the year."*** This is a tacit admission of the fact that currently there are only 18 Criminalists and 7 Forensic Lab Technicians despite the fact that the budget calls for 21 and 9 respectively.

    d. From page 4 of the report: ***"We are making progress filling hard to recruit positions, especially in the Sheriff's Office and the Department of Human Services. The Human Resources Division will continue to address the unique challenges of every department. The Human Resources Division is working persistently to enhance recruitment efforts, including enhancing the candidate experience with more active communication throughout the hiring process. highlighting careers and employees via social media and leveraging the power of existing employees and labor organizations to actively seek new hires."***

2. In the Kern Behavioral Health and Recovery Services Annual Update Plan FY 2024-2025 the following points are made:

    a. On page 8, **"KernBHRS experienced workforce challenges in 2023, with high rates of turnover and fewer applicants for vacancies across professional and non-professional job classifications"** [In spite of this fact, the Board of Supervisors has instructed its representatives to refuse to grant any additional salary increases to classifications impacted by SB525, drastically reducing the opportunity for those in entry-level jobs to advance their earnings through promotions]

b. On page 129, **"One barrier to the program was operating the ACT [Assertive Community Treatment] team without a fully staffed team. Staff moving onto other professional opportunities has left the team short staffed."**

c. On page 133, **"The TAY [Transition Age Youth] team did not hire a new Individual Placement Support (IPS) staff to help with employment opportunities for the youth because of little interest."**

d. On page 136, **"Staffing shortage has created a substantial barrier for seniors to access services from the KernBHRS WISE [Wellness, Independence, and Senior Enrichment] team."** and on page 311 **"The minimum staffing has created a substantial barrier for seniors to access services from KernBHRS WISE Team."**

e. On page 228, in reference to the Crisis Hotline, **"Staffing has been an ongoing challenge. We are looking to hire additional staff to handle the current and future call/text/chat volume."**

f. On page 298, **"Staffing challenges experienced by KernBHRS, and contract providers resulted in extended periods of vacancy in multiple Reengagement positions."**

g. On page 300, in reference to the Suicide Prevention Outreach and Education Team, **"Not having enough staff to participate in all community outreach events has been a challenge,"**

h. On page 382 with reference to the Early Psychosis Intervention program, **"The primary challenge to the program has been staffing."**

3. The following images are excerpts from the **Kern County Mental Health Services Act 3-Year Plan 2023-2026** : The sections regarding the shortage of bilingual staff are of particular importance, given the Board of Supervisors' refusal to authorize their bargaining representatives to offer any increase in the bilingual pay premium. Also of interest is the fact that the classifications with serious vacancy issues when 3-year plan was issued continue to be short-staffed today.

Kern Behavioral Health and Recovery Services

Kern County Mental Health Services Act 3-Year Plan 2023-2026

On page 50 of the report:

IDENTIFIED WORKFORCE NEEDS

As a part of the Workforce Needs Assessment, the county is required to identify and evaluate needs of its Public Mental Health System workforce. This report was prepared by EVALCORP in collaboration with KernBHRS.

The primary needs identified in the FY 21-22 Workforce Needs Assessments are shown on the right.

In the time period between this Workforce Needs Assessment and the next Workforce Needs Assessment, progress towards these three needs will be monitored. These three needs align with goals from the Cultural Competency Plan (CCPR) for FY 22-23, as shown in Table 1 (please see CCPR for details).

Continuing staffing challenges and hard-to-fill vacancies

Continuing disproportionate representation in staff job categories

Difficulty competing with private sector in terms of work flexibility and pay

Table 1 – Identified Workforce Needs Matched to CCP Strategies

Identified Need	CCP Strategies
Staffing challenges and hard-to-fill vacancies	Criterion 1, Goal 1, Strategy 5 Criterion 1, Goal 4, Strategy 1 Criterion 1, Goal 4, Strategy 2 Criterion 6, Goal 1, Strategy 4
Disproportionate representation in staff job categories	Criterion 1, Goal 4, Strategy 1 Criterion 1, Goal 4, Strategy 2
Difficulty competing with private sector in terms of work flexibility and pay	Not applicable

On page 54 of the report:

ADDITIONAL POSITIONS NEEDED

Table 3 shows positions for which staff are needed, the number of staff needed, and the number of positions which are hard to fill or for which it is difficult to retain staff. The number of staff positions that it is hard to fill or hard to retain is not necessarily a subset of the number of staff needed, since these positions may be currently staffed. Additionally, Table 3 shows the specific geographic area where positions are hard to fill or staff are hard to retain and the number of positions for which priority in recruitment will be given to clients and family members of clients. However, at this time there are no specific geographic areas indicated in the Workforce Needs Assessment. A map of the geographic areas of Kern County is provided for reference in Figure 1.

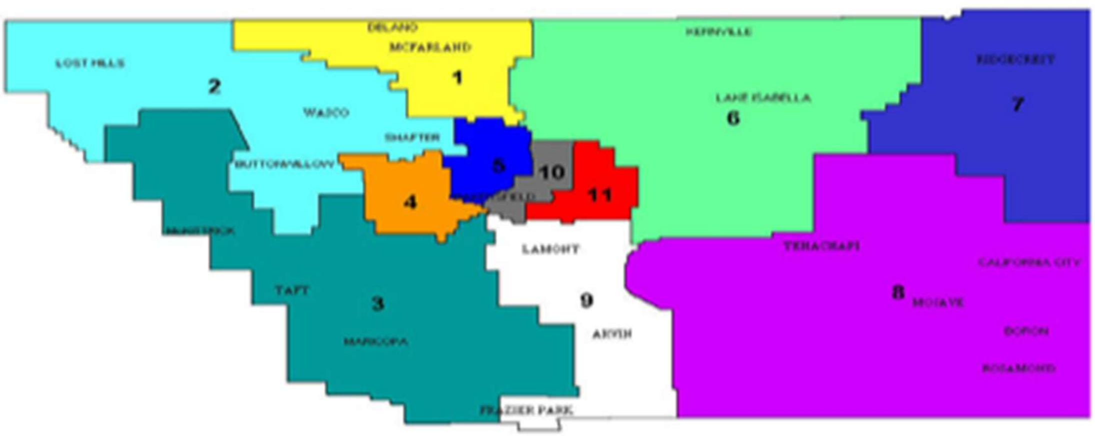
Table 3. Additional Positions Needed

Occupation	Staff Needed	Hard to Fill or Retain	Priority Given to Clients or Family of Clients	Geographic Areas
Licensed mental health staff	**25**	**48**	**139**	**All**
Behavioral Health Therapist Trainee	25	48	128	All
Clinical Psychologist I			4	All
Medical Assistant			6	All
Nurse Practitioner			1	All
Managerial and supervisory positions	**11**	**0**	**0**	**All**
Administrative Coordinator	1			All
Behavioral Health Recovery System Administrator	2			All
Behavioral Health Unit Supervisor	2			All
Contract Administrator	2			All
Coordinator of Admin. & Legislative Analysis	1			All
LAN Systems Administrator	1			All
Program Support Supervisor	1			All
Senior Behavioral Health Credentialing Specialist	1			All
Mental health, not required to be licensed	**45**	**0**	**271**	**All**
Behavioral Health Peer Specialist	6		4	All
Behavioral Health Recovery Specialist Aide	2		17	All
Behavioral Health Recovery Specialist	28		204	All
Substance Use Disorder Specialist	6		44	All
Substance Use Prevention Specialist	3		2	All
Other health care professionals who provide services	**34**	**14**	**25**	**All**
Behavioral Health Nurse	13	5	16	All
Medical Assistant	4			All
Pre-Licensed Clinical Psychologist	3		2	All
Vocational Nurse	14	9	7	All
Support staff	**42**	**0**	**21**	**All**
Behavioral Health Planning Analyst	1			All

On page 55 of the report:

Occupation	Staff Needed	Hard to Fill or Retain	Priority Given to Clients or Family of Clients	Geographic Areas
Departmental Analyst I	6			All
Electronic Health Record Specialist I	1			All
Fiscal Support Specialist	2			All
Fiscal Support Technician	3			All
Marketing & Promotions Associate II	1			All
Office Services Assistant	2			All
Office Services Specialist	1			All
Office Services Technician	11			All
Patient Rights Advocate	2			All
Program Specialist I	6		13	All
Program Technician	4		8	All
Programmer II	1			All
Senior Office Services Specialist	1			All
Fiscal Support Technician	3			All

Figure 1. Map of Kern Geographical Areas



Area	
1	Delano, McFarland, Pond
2	Shafter, Lost Hills, Buttonwillow, Wasco, Semitropic
3	Taft, McKittrick, Tupman, Maricopa, Fellows
4	West Bakersfield
5	North Bakersfield, Glenville, Woody
6	Kern Mountain, Lake Isabella, Kernville, Weldon

Area	
7	Ridgecrest (North Desert)
8	Tehachapi, Mojave, Rosamond, Boron, California City (South Desert)
9	Arvin, Lamont, Frazier Park
10	Central/Southeast Bakersfield
11	East Bakersfield

On page 61 of the report:

LANGUAGE COMPETENCIES OF STAFF

In order to ensure access to quality public mental health services for people whose primary language is not English, a certain proportion of staff are required to be proficient in other languages. For Kern County, the threshold language is Spanish. In the Workforce Needs Assessment, the County is required to indicate the number of staff who are proficient in that language and the estimated number of additional staff needed to meet the need.

The number of additional staff required to meet the need is calculated by comparing the proportion of staff proficient in Spanish to the proportion of Kern County residents who speak Spanish at home (American Community Survey, 2021). The additional staff required shows the number of staff who would need to be hired – in addition to those already employed – in order to equalize these two proportions.

Table 6 – Language Competencies of Staff

	Number of Staff Who Speak this Language	Number of Additional Staff Required to Meet Need
English	872	0
Spanish	139	201
Other Languages	0	0

It is important to understand that Kern County has always had a greater need of certified Spanish translators than the County has staffed. To help offset this ongoing challenge, Kern County has a contract with the Language Line to provide 24/7 interpretation services (verbal & written) in 240 available languages to all of BHRS. The Language Line in FY 21-22 provided a little over 505 hours of translated services to BHRS. This fills a gap in the need for translated services. The chart below illustrates the frequency of usage of the language line from FY 21-22.

Language	Verbal Translations	Written Translations
SPANISH	1988	0
FARSI	81	2
PUNJABI	46	0
ARABIC	13	0
VIETNAMESE	8	2
KOREAN	8	0

Language	Verbal Translations	Written Translations
ROMANIAN	5	0
TAGALOG	5	0
MANDARIN	4	0
HINDI	4	0
TELUGU	1	0
RUSSIAN	1	0

On page 63 of the report:

ADDITIONAL WORKFORCE NEEDS

Finally, the county may list additional workforce needs not already identified in the above portions of the Workforce Needs Assessment. Additional needs are summarized below.

KernBHRS is in particular need of BH Therapists, BH Nurses, Vocational nurses, and Office Service Technicians. These classifications are essential to our department and have become hard-to-fill. The current number of vacancies for each of the positions is estimated below:

- BH Therapists Trainees: 25 vacancies
- BH Nurses: 13 vacancies
- Vocational Nurses: 14 vacancies
- Office Service Technicians: 11 vacancies

KernBHRS is the primary mental/behavioral health service provider for Kern County and is required to maintain the Network Adequacy Certification standards of keeping vacancies below a **10%** percent ratio. As of July 2022, KernBHRS has 921 permanent positions with 160 vacancies. The department's current vacancy percentage rate is 17%.

The Behavioral Health Director has made it a priority to enhance efforts towards recruitment and retention, resulting in a current 8.8% vacancy rate as of May 2023. Measures included:

- Increase telework options for non-direct service staff
- Enhance loan forgiveness programs
- Provide more options for clinical supervision to increase more practicum students to work for BHRS
- Launch a staff wellness program in partnership with the Public Health department to promote long term wellness strategies for workforce and to avoid burnout
- Increased opportunities for existing staff to gain other skill sets by working with other populations, resulting in cross training opportunities in other teams
- BHRS Human Resources coordinated with the larger County Human Resources department to create lean processes to expedite hiring. Reduced the onboarding time for new staff from 2 months to 3-4 weeks.
- Increase partnership with learning institutions for heightened recruitment efforts, including:
    - Human Resources presentations to local High Schools to grow pipeline development and interest to work in the behavioral health field.
    - Increased career outreach to Universities and Colleges outside of Kern County for potential graduates entering the field.
    - Internship recruitment with local career events and fairs.
    - Increased career outreach to Universities that are deemed Hispanic Serving Institutions or API serving institutions.