Collaboration with policymakers at the state and local levels is crucial if practicing psychologists want to play an integral role in transforming the health care systems where they live. By getting involved in state and local issues, we as psychologists have an opportunity to showcase the value of what we bring to health care in our communities.

Before coming to APA, I spent more than a decade working with community leaders in Philadelphia, as well as local psychologists and other health care professionals, to identify and implement new, innovative health care service delivery approaches to address the behavioral health needs of city residents and specifically to reduce health disparities.

It soon became clear that Philadelphia’s public behavioral health agency and local practicing psychologists needed to embrace a new way of providing health care that incorporated a recovery-based orientation to understanding mental health and substance use disorders bolstered by the latest research findings. We also needed to increase funding for mental health and addiction services and train more psychologists and other health care providers to serve this population.

By working with local and state leaders, and listening to the perspectives and experiences of Philadelphia citizens, psychologists played an important leadership role in changing the way health care services were delivered. State-level advocacy, combined with cost savings derived from the implementation of innovative and effective programs, helped us obtain additional funding to train more behavioral health providers and create new programs for prevention and mental health screening.

Psychologists across the country, like Robin Henderson, PsyD, in Oregon, are already actively engaged at the state level. In her role as a behavioral health administrator for a network of hospitals and clinics, Dr. Henderson has effectively integrated psychologists into primary care clinics where they work alongside physicians to develop and implement treatment plans for patients. Henderson is also encouraging psychologists to serve on treatment panels for Medicaid, which is the largest single payer of behavioral health services in the country.

As psychologists, we should increase our focus on community-level interventions. Practicing psychologists can help local leaders and policymakers transform health care practice and delivery systems by assessing the needs of the people living in our communities and developing a strategy to prevent, treat and rehabilitate individuals with mental health and substance use problems.