

# Behavioral Health Partnership

Dear JBC Members

The Behavioral Health Partnership (Partnership), made up of 12 provider, advocacy and recovery agencies, recognizes the difficult position you are in during this time of severe state budget cuts due to the COVID-19 emergency. We write to you as providers of mental health and addiction services and as advocates for Coloradans living with mental health and substance use disorders (MH/SUD) and their family members.

We are reaching out to let you know that we are ready and willing to partner with you as you navigate difficult decisions of budget cuts, and to lend our expertise on the behavioral healthcare system.

The Partnership recognizes that the next wave caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will be the need for broader MH/SUD service availability and accessibility. COVID-19's social disruptions and economic destruction are already causing widespread fear and anxiety, a sense of isolation, post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, and grief. The fallout from this crisis will likely be even worse than the effects of the Great Recession in 2008, when suicides associated with increased unemployment spiked 13 percent, and 46,000 lives were lost due to unemployment and income inequality.<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind, the Partnership has enumerated some of the most important policies established in Colorado that we believe need to be preserved:

- 1) Funding for urgent, immediate, and crisis behavioral healthcare including the Colorado Crisis Response System's Walk in Centers;
- 2) Core service contract funding that ensures that capacity remains to provide Colorado with a behavioral health safety net, including protecting the core funding for Community Mental Health Centers and the Managed Service Organizations and other safety net providers, including recovery support services.
- 3) Maintenance of programs for rural mental health and substance use treatments as outlined in HB19-1287;
- 4) Maintenance of the provisions of SB16-202, which expands substance use treatments and accessibility by using marijuana tax cash funds.
- 5) Continuance of grant programs for schools to enhance their emotional and mental health providers and programs.

In the face of significant budget cuts, it is imperative that our government and healthcare system are operating as efficiently as possible, ensuring that every dollar spent is maximized towards providing care that so many Coloradans depend on during and after crises such as these. We urge you to exercise your influence to ensure that:

1. Systemic investments are prioritizing community-based, cost effective, lower levels of care whenever possible. Proven to be effective in achieving health outcomes for many individuals, the continuum of community-based prevention and care is a critical tool

<sup>1</sup> McKinsey & Company, "Returning to resilience: The impact of COVID-19 on mental health and substance use," April 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/returning-to-resilience-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-behavioral-health>.



towards curbing overall healthcare costs. Requiring our state departments, payors, and other oversight entities to tightly manage utilization while also directing state dollars towards early access care will be more necessary than ever to ensure allocations are reaching as many people as possible.

2. Administrative processes across governmental payors and funders are minimized, aligned, and coordinated. Many of the allocations made by the Joint Budget Committee for behavioral healthcare each year are only partially spent on service delivery, and Colorado has grown far too comfortable with allowing significant reporting requirements and administrative processes to minimize the reach state funds.
3. JBC allocations for programs with similar goals and which are targeted at similar populations (e.g., care navigation) are aligned and efficient. Dollars must be spent wisely in coordinated efforts across departments, rather than be spread across multiple administrative layers which limit capacity.

We also recognize that being helpful requires us to suggest ideas that you may wish to consider in balancing the state budget during this time.

- 1) Working with HCPF, maintain telehealth flexibilities and funding levels and adopt policies that enhance access to this type of care permanently. Since the flexibilities put in place during the pandemic, increased utilization of telehealth services has already proven to be cost efficient and more accessible to many Coloradans.
- 2) Ensure that billing and payment processes are streamlined and efficient, especially for major Governmental payors such as the Department of Healthcare Policy and Financing and the Department of Human services. Contracting, granting, administration, and accounting processes must be swift and efficient if we are to make each dollar go further towards ensuring access to care.
- 3) As the number of Colorado citizens losing their health care and enrolling in Medicaid is already rising, we suggest that you do not cut reimbursement rates to providers; this keeps the existing pool of providers and encourages new providers to accept Medicaid enrollees.
- 4) Find ways, in discussion with DORA, to maximize the scope of practice of mental health and ways substance use disorder providers to ensure our workforce is as effective as they can be;
- 5) Find, in conversation with managed care contractors and Office of Behavioral Health Contractors, to expand the use of peer support specialists and family advocates, who can be more fully integrated into provider networks and service provider networks and help offset the expanding enrollment of individuals in the Medicaid program.

The Partnership is happy to work with you on these and any other potential long-term cost-saving recommendations. Please feel free to include us in any conversation or research on the above.

Returning to resilience requires addressing the mental health and addiction impacts of COVID-19. According to the McKinsey Report MH/SUD “are known drivers of lower productivity, increased healthcare costs, and higher mortality...A likely surge of people experiencing acute behavioral health problems—both those with new symptoms and those with existing conditions—has potential to further strain the healthcare system and add cost to an already unprecedented economic downturn.”<sup>2</sup>

Our state must fight COVID-19 together, while also addressing the MH/SUD challenges that threaten to cause a second wave of illness and death. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Our Best Wishes to you during your deliberations. Please feel free to contact us for further information.

Sincerely,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.