

The term “behavioral health” refers to services for individuals at risk of, or suffering from, mental illness and/or addiction.¹

PRIORITY ISSUES

- **Treatment does work.** Behavioral health services have significant positive impacts on the health and well-being of individuals and their families.²
- **Funding is insufficient to treat serious behavioral health diagnoses.** Bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, major depression, and addiction disorders are not adequately funded and other behavioral health issues are not even addressed.³
- **Mental illness and addiction are often co-occurring.** People are often diagnosed with both a mental illness and an addiction disorder making treatment more difficult to access and creating other personal challenges.⁴



In behavioral health surveys, Central Texans report experiencing more mental health and substance abuse problems than the general Texas population.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IN TEXAS

According to estimates by the federal government, as many as 17% of Texans, or 4,147,132 people have a mental illness. Among those, an estimated 937,031 adults have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or major depression. An estimated 451,163 are considered to be seriously and persistently mentally ill.⁵ Despite these large numbers that indicate high needs, the state of Texas ranks 49th in per capita mental health spending.⁶ In surveys conducted from 2004-2006, 26% of Texans reported having abused alcohol or an illegal drug in the past month.⁷ Behavioral health issues cause symptoms that interfere with family and social relationships. The symptoms create a decreased ability to relate to others and to work effectively, and often add tremendous emotional and financial burdens on family members.⁸

Central Texas faces some unique behavioral health challenges:

- Austin and Travis County's suicide rates exceed that of the State of Texas.^{9, 10}
- The supply of behavioral health professionals in Travis County has decreased since 2002, despite an increased demand for behavioral health services.¹¹
- The number of individuals presenting to emergency rooms with primary behavioral health complaints increased 84% between 2006 and 2007.¹²
- The Central Texas Region exceeds the state and the nation in the percentage of people reporting: alcohol abuse and dependence, drug abuse and dependence, needing but not receiving treatment for alcohol use and drug use, serious psychological distress, and major depressive episodes.¹³

HOW DOES OUR COMMUNITY CARE FOR PEOPLE WITH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ISSUES?

Many local organizations provide screening, assessment, and treatment. There are also a wide array of services focused on prevention/community education, such as peer support and family education.¹⁴ Our community has also taken other non-traditional steps to address behavioral health issues. Travis County's Sheriff's Office and the Austin Police Department have groups of law enforcement officials who are specially trained to defuse public safety calls involving people with

Frequently Asked Questions about Behavioral Health

mental illness.¹⁵ Travis County also created a Mental Health Public Defenders Office and an Adult Drug Diversion Court, both with specially trained staff.^{16, 17} Additionally, the Austin-Travis County MHMR (ATCMHMR), through crisis redesign, has developed a Mobile Crisis Outreach Team which can respond 24/7 to persons experiencing a psychiatric crisis.¹⁸

Local organizations are committed to incorporating best practices which are processes, practices, and systems that are widely recognized as improving an organization's performance and efficiency.¹⁹ Best practices in the behavioral health field are based on the values of recovery as a unifying concept, partnership building, providing optimal treatment, and focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable populations.²⁰

HOW CAN WE ENHANCE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES IN OUR COMMUNITY?

- Ensure a behavioral health continuum of care by securing sufficient funds to meet the needs for crisis and non-crisis behavioral health services.²¹
- Increase coordination between community-based behavioral health service providers.²²
- If you are an employer, offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which includes behavioral health assistance for employees. Organizations with EAPs in place have a 21% lower absenteeism rate and a 14% higher productivity rate.²³
- Implement innovative strategies such as an integrated healthcare model.²⁴

WHAT IS INTEGRATED HEALTHCARE?

Integrated healthcare means systematically combining physical and behavioral health services. The most common models of integrated health care focus on either referrals or co-location of services. With the referral approach, physical health care providers develop agreements with behavioral health providers to provide behavioral health services as needed. In a co-location model, physical health care providers and behavioral health providers are physically located in the same building or on the same premises, with the idea that the proximity of these services will make it easier for people to access care for their physical and behavioral health needs.²⁵

Over half of the people in need of behavioral health services seek treatment from their primary care provider, who is not trained to provide this type of treatment. In addition, 25% of all primary care recipients have diagnosable mental disorders.²⁶ Typically, patients with behavioral health problems tend to over utilize medical providers' time.²⁷ Integrated healthcare creates a one-stop shop where clients are able to receive comprehensive and holistic services.²⁸ As a result, behavioral health symptoms are reduced and patients experience improved psychosocial functioning and quality of life.²⁹ This is crucial as persons with behavioral health problems die 25 years younger than the average American.³⁰ Medical professionals also tend to respond positively to integrated healthcare which can reduce staff turnover rates.³¹ Locally, E-Merge, a



Integrated healthcare has several benefits for medical patients such as more effective and holistic treatment, reduced behavioral health symptoms, and improved quality of life.

Note from the National Institute of Health and the American Psychiatric Association: 1) Mental illness is a health condition that changes a person's thinking, feelings, or behavior (or all three) and that causes the person distress and difficulty in functioning.³² 2) An addiction is any behavior that meets at least three of the following seven criteria: substance tolerance, withdrawal, difficulty controlling substance use, negative consequences, significant time or energy spent, put off or neglected activities, and desire to cut down substance use.³³

collaborative effort between the Travis County Healthcare District and ATCMHMR (Travis County's behavioral health authority), is considered an example of best practice in integrated healthcare, and was recognized nationally as a model program by the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare.³⁴ E-Merge locates behavioral health professionals within the 14 local community health centers.

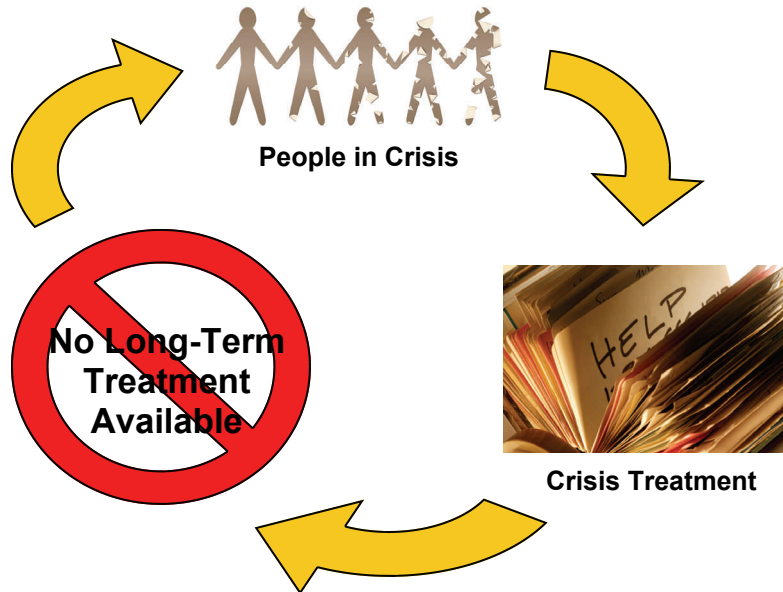
WHERE ARE THE GAPS IN SERVICE IN OUR BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE SYSTEM?

- The funding does not meet the needs of people with the diagnoses of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, major depression, and addiction disorders and results in waiting lists for services.³⁵

- The funding does not address the needs of people with other behavioral health diagnoses.³⁶

- There is an increased need for non-crisis services as a result of Texas's improvements to our statewide crisis services. More people are now receiving crisis treatment, however people who receive crisis treatment are often later referred for long-term non-crisis treatment.³⁷ Funding for long-term non-crisis treatment is insufficient to meet the need. Without long-term non-crisis treatment, people often fall back into crisis.

- Our community's lack of adequate behavioral health services often drives people to seek behavioral health services in other communities and creates a personal burden that deters treatment because of disruption of family and work obligations. This especially affects the poor and working poor who take on an additional financial burden due to the lack of services.³⁸



WHAT OFTEN HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WITH UNMET BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS?

One critical outcome is that a large number of people with behavioral health issues end up in jail or prison. Prisons have become default behavioral health facilities as institutional health care has declined and community-based mental health services remain severely underfunded.³⁹



Many people with behavioral health issues do not receive treatment and ultimately end up in jails and prisons.

Long waiting lists for treatment have impacted jail over-crowding, as the courts often hold offenders in jail until a treatment bed is available. Offenders with substance abuse issues have difficulty maintaining abstinence while waiting for a treatment slot.⁴⁰ Mental illness prevalence rates in prisons significantly exceed those of the general population.⁴¹ Substance abuse rates in prison are also high with more than 80% of inmates showing indications of serious drug or alcohol abuse.⁴² Behavioral health issues may cause a person to have difficulty in applying for housing and may exclude them from housing units that have "clean and sober" requirements or prohibit persons with criminal histories.⁴³

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

- Encourage public investment at both the state and local levels for a continuum of care for behavioral health services.
- Treat illness, don't criminalize mental health and addiction illnesses.
- Share the facts about behavioral health issues and about people dealing with such challenges. Speak up if you hear or read something that isn't true.
- Treat people with behavioral health needs with respect and dignity.
- Teach children about behavioral health. Help them see that these diagnoses are like any other illness and can be treated.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

- Call 2-1-1, a comprehensive database of health and human care services, for referrals to community resources.
- [Austin Travis County MHMR Center](#)
- [Behavioral Health Education and Support Resource Guide](#)
- [Mental Health America of Texas](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)
- [Travis County Adult Probation Department](#)

The Behavioral Health Planning Partnership serves as the link between the community and policy-makers at the local, state, and federal level and assists them in determining and addressing the behavioral health needs of youth with substance use disorders and adults with mental illness and/or substance use disorders in Travis County. State and local organizations were involved in the development of this FAQ. For more information, visit:

http://www.caction.org/behavioral_health/index.htm

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