

Shortage of Behavioral Health Resources Means Many Californians Can't Get the Treatment They Need

The Issue

California has a [massive shortage](#) of mental health and substance use disorder treatment professionals, and access to behavioral health care [varies drastically](#) depending on the county. Almost a quarter of adults with a mental illness are not able to receive the treatment they need — with no improvement since 2011. Children and adolescents are under unprecedented levels of distress, with suicide and self-harm on the rise at alarming levels. Half of mental health problems emerge before the age of 14, yet [nearly half of children and adolescents](#) are unable to get the mental health services they need.

On any given day in California, [550 patients remain in inpatient psychiatric care](#), even when they're ready for discharge; the average number of unnecessary days these patients spend in the hospital is 27. Nearly all hospitals ([92%](#)) that provide psychiatric inpatient care report they are [unable to admit new patients](#) because discharging current patients to step-down care is so difficult. This congestion means patients are in more restrictive settings than necessary, which leads to emergency department overcrowding.

What's Needed

Solutions must mirror those in primary care, where the goal is to prevent illness and provide the right care in the right setting. As the state invests billions to develop comprehensive behavioral health services, a focus on prevention, early intervention, and community-based care will help Californians avoid hospitalization, incarceration, conservatorships, and institutionalization.

In March 2024, California voters passed [Proposition 1](#), a CHA-supported measure that will improve statewide access to behavioral health services, increase behavioral health treatment facility infrastructure, expand the behavioral health workforce, and increase investment in early intervention services — with a focus on children and youth. As the California Health and Human Services Agency's [Crisis Care Continuum Plan](#) recommends, California should also:

- Build toward consistent statewide access to behavioral health care so that every Californian has access to baseline treatment options, regardless of their type of health insurance or county of residence.
- Enhance care coordination by removing unnecessary, bureaucratic barriers that make care fragmented and complex for people to navigate.
- Design and deliver a high-quality and equitable system for **all** Californians by developing a comprehensive strategy for data measurement and quality of care.



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