

Investments Needed to Tackle Behavioral Health Crisis Made Even Worse by COVID-19

The Issue

COVID-19 has exacerbated longstanding behavioral health challenges. Economic insecurity, social isolation, health concerns, the strain of caring for others or working on the front lines — all have taken their toll. Consider:

- Anxiety and depression among adults nearly quadrupled between early 2019 and July 2020, with 41% of adults in California reporting symptoms associated with generalized anxiety or major depression.
- Children were not immune to the effects of the pandemic, and youth suicide risk has risen to alarming levels as hospital emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts among youth ages 12 to 17 were more than 50% higher in 2020 than in 2019. The numbers are so alarming that the U.S. Surgeon General recently issued a rare public health advisory on the mental health challenges confronting youth, urging action to address what he called an emerging crisis exacerbated by pandemic hardships.



Emergency department visits for **suspected suicide attempts among ages 12 to 17** were more than **50% higher** in 2020 than in 2019.

At the same time, demand for behavioral health care has grown exponentially as the number of providers has decreased, making the challenges of delivering care more complex than ever. Front-line workers are experiencing high rates of burnout and increased anxiety. A poll in mid-April found that 64% of households with a health care worker said worry and stress caused them to experience at least one adverse effect on their mental health.

California must make more investments in behavioral health, including early detection. The strategies must mirror those in primary health care, where the goal is to prevent more severe illness through early intervention. This includes increasing the number of youth receiving screening for behavioral health needs. Investing in prevention, early intervention, and a continuum of services will help Californians with behavioral health needs avoid acute care, hospitalization, incarceration, conservatorships, and institutionalization. But the fact remains that California does not currently have enough capacity to treat the growing number of people who need behavioral health care.

What's Needed

California should lead the nation in prevention and early detection of behavioral health disorders, while expanding permanent treatment capacity for those who need it. The multi-billion-dollar behavioral health investments in the 2021 Budget Act offer a rare chance for California to create life-saving care for individuals in crisis. But federal investment is also needed. The Build Back Better Act ([H.R. 5376](#)), which passed the House in November but has stalled in the Senate, includes funding for mental health and substance use disorder care. A number of provisions in the \$2 trillion bill would increase access to behavioral health services and crisis care, bolster the behavioral health workforce and its pipeline, and expand mental health parity.

By utilizing 24/7 crisis support, partial hospitalization and intensive case management, crisis and transitional residential treatment, and medication such as naloxone, the need to treat an individual in a more costly and restrictive inpatient hospital setting can often be averted. Partnering with local health and behavioral health providers to build on recent crisis stabilization and acute treatment service investments, hospitals can bring new levels of care to residents whose lives are at stake.

Additionally, California should establish a baseline dataset to track key behavioral health indicators and monitor progress, aiming to achieve 10% improvement each year in the following:

- Reduce the delay from the onset of symptoms to engagement in treatment for mental health and substance use disorder needs
- Reduce the disparities in behavioral health service utilization among racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation/gender identity populations
- Reduce the proportion of individuals with mental health and substance use disorder needs in jails and prisons
- Reduce the rate of re-hospitalization following a psychiatric hospitalization
- Increase the number of children and youth receiving screenings for behavioral health needs
- Improve the satisfaction of consumers and families with the behavioral health care services they receive

Learn more about the vision at [Answering the Call to Action by A Vision for All Californians' Behavioral Health](#).