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Wait Times Soar for Children Needing Behavioral Health Services in Mass., Survey Finds

The Number of Children Waiting for Certain Services has risen by 41%

FRAMINGHAM, Mass. (Dec. 14, 2023) – Children with complex behavioral health needs are waiting as long as six months for services, and the number of children waiting for some services has increased by as much as 41% since 2022, according to a survey of behavioral health providers across the state released today by the [Association for Behavioral Healthcare](#) (ABH).

ABH surveyed 30 provider organizations that operate 208 sites across Massachusetts and served 15,540 children and adolescents from July 1, 2022, to May 31, 2023. These safety-net providers deliver an array of home and community behavioral health services for children known collectively as the Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI).

The survey report, titled [Kids Are Waiting: Children’s Behavioral Health Services Crisis and Collapse](#), found that families with MassHealth (the state’s Medicaid program) were waiting as long as 20.5 weeks for services and those with private insurance were waiting even more, as long as 26.5 weeks. The cause for these delays is primarily a 35% total position vacancy rate among the providers delivering these services. Sadly, the survey data showed there were 4,214 children on waiting lists for all CBHI services. The increase since 2022 in the number of children waiting for In-Home Therapy is the highest of any category, at 41%.

“In light of this startling survey data, there is a moral imperative for the Commonwealth and our health plan leaders to act,” said Lydia Conley, ABH President and CEO. “Thousands of the state’s children and adolescents – our most precious resource – are waiting for months and months to get the care they need. As conveyed in the very title of our report, we are past the point of crisis and rapidly approaching collapse.”

The soaring job vacancy rates at behavioral health providers, which result in part because state and private insurance reimbursement rates are not sufficient for recruiting and retaining clinicians, are leading to the closure of programs.

From Fiscal Year 2019 through the first 11 months of Fiscal Year 2023:

- 17 in-home therapy programs closed;
- 15 therapeutic mentoring programs closed; and
- Six in-home behavioral services programs closed.

For every 10 staff members that have left a position at a behavioral health program, only eight were hired. Clinical vacancy rates for some services run as high as 41%.

The report includes recommendations for state policymakers and health plan leaders to act, including:

- Making immediate investments in the system through higher rates of reimbursement for services, greater funding for outpatient services, and the development of new programming that is culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse;
- Continuing investments in education and training opportunities and creating a permanent workforce center;
- Improving access for children with private health coverage by requiring health plans to indicate on member cards whether the plan is subject to state-mandated benefit laws, and an examination of insurance cost-sharing requirements for mitigation or elimination; and
- Rebalancing health care spending toward behavioral health and primary care to address chronic and persistent underfunding of these services.

“This survey, while even more alarming than earlier efforts, adds to a critical mass of similar work by many organizations to study children’s mental health access,” said Conley. “We have thoroughly diagnosed the problem – what we now need is firm, decisive, collaborative action.”

An issue brief about the ABH’s survey is available through the following web link:

<https://www.abhmass.org/newsroom/abh-in-the-news/2429-cbhibrief.html>

About the Association for Behavioral Healthcare

The Association for Behavioral Healthcare (ABH) represents 81 organizations that are the primary providers of community-based behavioral healthcare in Massachusetts. Their 47,000 dedicated employees provide clinically effective and cost-sensitive care to 81,000 individuals on any given day in communities throughout the state. ABH is recognized as the leading statewide association advocating for the preservation, promotion and advancement of community-based mental health and addiction services. Visit www.abhmass.org for more information.

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