

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Association for Behavioral Healthcare (ABH) is a statewide organization of 81 community-based mental health and substance use disorder treatment provider organizations that are the Commonwealth's safety net for behavioral health services. ABH members deliver an array of behavioral health services for children and youth known collectively as the Children's Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI). ABH surveyed our members to learn about challenges in accessing care in August 2022 and followed up in July 2023.

Our member organizations report worsening difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff due to inadequate compensation and benefits, resulting in large wait lists for services for children. For example, the 2022 survey responses show that In-Home Therapy, one of these specialty behavioral health services, had a waitlist of 1,630 children with wait times of 16 weeks for children with MassHealth (Medicaid) and 20 weeks for children with private insurance coverage. The subsequent survey has shown that service access has continued to deteriorate. As of May 2023, ABH survey respondents reported:

- » The number of children waiting for these services had **increased by 41%**;
- » Wait times were **averaging 20.5-weeks** for MassHealth enrolled families;
- » A **26.5-week wait** for families with private health insurance; and
- » A **35% total position vacancy rate** across these services.

Number of families waiting and average wait time by service from 7/1/22 – 5/31/23

CBHI Service	Number of families on waitlist	Average wait time to start service for families with MassHealth	Average wait time to start service for families with private health insurance
Intensive Care Coordination	562	7.6 weeks	9.5 weeks
In-Home Therapy	2,297	20.5 weeks	26.5 weeks
In-Home Behavioral Services	509	12.5 weeks	13.9 weeks
Therapeutic Mentoring Services	846	13.6 weeks	14.9 weeks



OTHER FINDINGS SHOW THAT:

- » **Financing and workforce pressures** are forcing program closures, including 17 In-Home Therapy programs; 15 Therapeutic Mentoring programs and six In-Home Behavioral Service programs;
- » **The workforce exodus is continuing:** Since September 2021, 1,553 child-serving professionals left their agencies. **For every 10 staff that left, just 8 were hired.**
- » **The number of children losing access is growing:** Responding organizations reported that the number of children receiving home- and community-based services in May 2023 declined significantly to approximately 32% fewer children than pre-pandemic levels. This coincides with unprecedented need for these services as we emerge from the pandemic.

This report shares data for all five service areas of the Children's Behavioral Health Initiative and makes solution-oriented recommendations in four key areas to reverse the alarming trends, including:

- » **1** Immediate actions that can be taken to increase access, which include increasing funding, investing in outpatient services and developing programming that is culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse.
- » **2** Continued investment in education and training opportunities that reinforce the behavioral health pipeline and creation of a permanent workforce center, staffed by experts, to address behavioral health workforce issues through long-term planning.
- » **3** Improve access for children with private health coverage by requiring insurance companies to indicate on member cards whether the health plan is subject to state mandated benefit laws, and to examine cost-sharing requirements to consider whether cost sharing can be eliminated or mitigated.
- » **4** Rebalance health care spending toward behavioral health and primary care to address chronic and persistent underfunding of these vital services.

Some of these solutions are currently proposed in bills that are before the Massachusetts Legislature. Others will require investment during the upcoming and future budget cycles to ensure access to behavioral health care for our Commonwealth's most vulnerable children and families.

