



Increased Funding for Mental Health Services – Frequently Asked Questions

Community-based mental health services—such as community residential programs, family-based support, outpatient care and crisis intervention—are critical to the well-being of our constituents and our communities. Funding levels for county mental health services have direct impacts on whether these important community and family supports will be available. Yet for too many years, state funding for mental health services has lagged far behind needs, as counties find themselves advocating to prevent these funds from being cut, much less achieving the increases that are needed to catch up from years of underfunding.

What is mental health base?

The mental health base funds are dollars that fund community mental health for education, prevention, and service provision in order to identify and address community need. Some examples of programs that only mental health base funds can pay for include student assistance programs in schools, respite, hotlines, prevention, housing, community education and outreach, employment supports and other programs that are not covered under other insurance plans. In essence, mental health base funds provide for upfront prevention and supplemental services that are critical to ensuring the health and wellbeing of those in our communities.

Why do mental health base funds matter to counties?

County human services providers are obligated to deliver a variety of services within their communities that include ensuring responsible program planning, fiscal management and monitoring of mental health, intellectual disability and autism services. Due to the broad variety of responsibilities and the increasing demand of mental health needs in our society, counties are being asked to do more and more to serve their local citizens and we want to be good partners and providers for our constituents. Some of the most dire needs for counties include those services that can only be paid for using county and base funds. Counties have been able to coordinate and invest in those programs and services that meet local needs and challenges, and clients and their families have been highly satisfied with these local services.

Didn't the Human Services Block Grant create flexibility for community mental health funds?

Many counties appreciate the flexibility afforded by the Human Services Block Grant but have stretched that funding as far as possible. Some counties have been unable to afford provider rate increases since 2008, and, while Medicaid expansion has allowed increased access, now counties are faced with a funding crisis for basic services for a population that is not eligible for Medicaid and a need for community supports that are not covered by Medicaid. Additionally, not all of the counties have chosen to use the block grant structure, but have other systems and joiners that work for their unique county situations.

Didn't Medicaid Expansion help provide funding for mental health?

In February of 2015, Gov. Wolf announced that Pennsylvania would transition to Medicaid expansion. The new benefit package extended health care treatment, both for physical health and behavioral health (PA's Behavioral HealthChoices Program) to almost three million individuals. While expanded Medicaid greatly improved access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment, Medicaid does not always cover the programs and supports required for sustained recovery which enables individuals to live as contributing members of the community. Medicaid also does not support community engagement with schools, employers, correctional officers, and community organizations. County mental health base funded by the commonwealth provides the supports and services that function as the glue, binding treatment and community supports together to ensure recovery and long-term health and wellbeing.

How has access to mental health services been impacted by COVID-19?

As communities have quarantined and issued social distancing and stay-at-home orders, the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) may be stressful for people and impact their overall mental health status. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Coping with stress will make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger. For those with preexisting mental health issues, the stress of the situation on top of economic uncertainty can exacerbate conditions. Additionally, counties provide a host of human services and invest heavily in establishing a social services safety net, comprised of programs and services that mental health base dollars pay for. The COVID-19 crisis is going to increase demands on the social services safety net. Counties were already stretching limited resources before the pandemic and as COVID-19 conditions continue, the need for accessible mental health services will only increase. Counties are working through the pandemic on the front lines continuing to provide services, but also acknowledge the needs that will outlast the pandemic.

What exactly is the ask?

Close collaboration between the legislature, the administration and counties is critical to addressing the mental health system as a whole. This includes increasing mental health base funds in the FY 2020-2021 state budget for expanded services, beds and diversion from jail and state hospitals, as well as abandoning efforts to dismantle Behavioral HealthChoices, which has provided important behavioral health services to some of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable community members. This will help counties to ensure that the safety net of services already in place is strong and sustainable, especially in this time when so much else is uncertain. Moreover, counties seek a long-term commitment to investing in the mental health base over the coming years to ensure that there is a sustainable investment in the years ahead that will help counties, the General Assembly and the administration to meet common goals of helping Pennsylvanians get the help they need through preventative efforts and expanded programs, especially in a post-COVID-19 world.