

New legislation is finally helping to end the disparity in behavioral health care

MassHealth clients in crisis now have access to same-day treatment at the Brien Center's new Community Behavioral Health Center and quicker access to routine services

By M. Christine Macbeth, ACSW, LICSW, and Becca Phelps-Smith, MSW, LICSW

Berkshire Eagle readers who follow commentary on these pages know that we have written frequently over the last few years about the crises that have impacted access to behavioral health care. In essence, the Brien Center has faced two seemingly existential challenges: a severe shortage of licensed clinicians to provide high-quality care to Berkshire County residents, and reimbursements from the state that failed for years to match the cost of delivering care. Inadequate funding threatened critical programs and limited our ability to attract and retain staff.

We, and our colleagues across the Commonwealth, implored legislators and the former Baker administration to elevate behavioral health care to the same priority as all other forms of medical treatment. While we had made the same plea for years, the COVID-19 pandemic finally helped to focus this dire need. Local, state and national media were filled with stories about desperate people seeking mental health and addiction services who were placed on long waiting lists, even for crisis care.

We are gratified to report that positive change is now underway. The most recent state budget includes several provisions that we expect will begin addressing the inequity in access to mental health and addiction services for MassHealth clients, who typically depend on community agencies like the Brien Center for services. The most promising change is the new Community Behavioral Health Center (CBHC), launched in January at the Brien Center, that is designed to provide immediate access to emergency treatment for adults and children in crisis or those needing urgent assistance, and accelerated access to routine behavioral health care for MassHealth clients.

Funded by a multi-million-dollar state contract, the CBHC is now the entry point for care, which includes comprehensive and coordinated services, same-day evaluations, urgent and crisis treatment and medications, group support programs and more. The program also offers telehealth appointments and provides emergency services in locations throughout the community, including schools and homes. Emergency help or more information can be obtained by calling 800-252-0227. This is a big step forward for our community.

The new legislation funding the CBHC, which is called the "Roadmap for Behavioral Health Reform," also increases reimbursement rates to community-based providers like the Brien Center, with a long-term goal of ending "boarding" in emergency departments where people in

crisis often wait for care. These changes, long overdue, will begin to address the disparity in behavioral health care.

Despite all this, the future of community-based behavioral health care is not yet secure. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, the U.S. does not have nearly enough behavioral health professionals to treat everyone who needs mental health or addiction services. The shortage is most acute in rural areas like the Berkshires.

“We have a chronic shortage of psychiatrists, and it’s going to keep growing,” says Saul Levin, MD, CEO and medical director of the American Psychiatric Association. “People can’t get care. It affects their lives, their ability to work, to socialize, or even to get out of bed.”

Significantly boosting the ranks of behavioral health professionals is hopefully the next frontier for the coalition of forces now looking for ways to attract and incentivize future behavioral health professionals. It’s a compelling need, yet such a gratifying career. We see it every day on the faces of our dedicated staff who work so hard to transform the lives of individuals and families in our community.

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