



Appropriate Funding to Support the Crumbling Mental Health System – 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 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 communities?

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. These innovations include building family-based intervention programs, crisis response, law enforcement ride along programs, school partnership services and overall general mental health prevention capacity to reduce the number of individuals seeking treatment in emergency departments.

What happens if there is no increase in mental health base funds?

For years, counties have been asking for much needed increases in human services funding to meet rapidly rising demands for services. This includes the establishment and sustainability of a social services safety net, comprised of programs and services that mental health base dollars pay for. Counties have seen a steady increase in jail admissions where individuals suffer from untreated behavioral health conditions, with jails becoming the *de facto* mental health safety

net. The pandemic has significantly increased demands on the social services safety net, stretching the resources of our providers and local agencies thin. Hospital emergency rooms are sometimes the only placement resources as other providers reduce their availability. The increased need coupled with workforce shortages, increased mental health issues and other lingering impacts of the pandemic further stress the ability for local entities to respond accordingly and appropriately to the ever-growing demand for service that has far outpaced needs. Counties, law enforcement, schools and providers have continued to work through the pandemic on the front lines, but also acknowledge the needs for service will outlast the pandemic tenfold.

What exactly is the ask?

Close collaboration between the legislature, the administration, counties and our community partners is critical to addressing the mental health system as a whole. This includes increasing mental health base funds in the FY 2022-2023 state budget for expanded services, beds and diversion from jail, state hospitals and emergency departments as well as treating individuals, children and their families where they are in their communities. 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, the administration and our communities 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.

Why does this matter now?

Time is of the essence. While local communities and providers have come together to sustain the safety net and serve those who need it most, the demand for service far outweighs capacity. This is being actualized in increased emergency department wait times as individuals seek treatment without knowing where else to go, students are having trouble accessing appropriate services, creating issues within our school and children and youth systems, law enforcement are being called to respond to more crisis calls and suicide rates have tragically increased. All of these outcomes are the results of historic underfunding of a system that puts in place measures to prevent and support those individuals before issues rise to crisis level. An investment in community-based mental health services is an investment in Pennsylvania's communities, our first responders, local governments, medical providers and overall wellbeing.