



PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD

March 11th, 2022

The Honorable Don Nottoli, Chair
Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
700 H Street, Suite 1450
Sacramento, CA 95814

We write to express our concern about youth mental health and the impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) upon school-age children in Sacramento. The emergence of COVID-19 had a sudden and profound effect as children and their families experienced widespread disruptions in daily life. Protective measures to mitigate the pandemic were enacted¹, such as the closures of schools, child care, and community programs, but also resulted in increased risk of social isolation and psychological distress among youth^{2,3}. As children transitioned from in-person classes to online learning modalities and broad social distancing mandates were implemented, youth screen time soared and children spent more and more time indoors. As a result, many children also experienced increased irritability, clinginess, fear, issues with sleeping and poor appetites, and increased rates of cyberbullying^{4,5}. A number of nonprofit organizations have reported increases in the number of calls and messages from young people seeking support because they were being bullied⁴.

More startling is that in 2020 there was a 31 percent increase in mental health-related emergency department visits and a 39 percent increase in the average weekly number of emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts compared to 2019⁶. In a recent public health advisory, the United States Surgeon General issued a warning and call to action to address the emerging youth mental health crisis exacerbated by pandemic hardships.

Even before the pandemic, many children in the United States were living with mental health disorders. Adolescents in particular have seen increases in poor mental health outcomes in recent years, such as persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness and suicidal thoughts⁷. It is especially important to note that many mental health conditions develop by adolescence and, if unaddressed, can persist into adulthood and limit quality of life.

On August 4th, 2021, the Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) hosted the Ad Hoc Mental Health Collaborative (Collaborative), a collection of elected school board members, community advocates, and students who champion expanded school-based mental health services in Sacramento County. The guest speakers spoke about the mental health issues students experienced before and during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as their initiatives aimed at addressing mental health in Sacramento schools. The Collaborative highlighted the need for increased school-based mental health services which remove barriers to access, allow for earlier diagnosis and intervention, reduce the burden on county mental health systems, and improve coordination among the different systems that youth interact with.

Testimony from student speakers was especially enlightening as they shared their experiences seeking and receiving mental health treatment in school and provided PHAB with a number of approaches they hoped to see implemented to enhance school-based mental health. These approaches including peer to peer mental health services, telehealth support, and prevention

and wellness support for the isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are deeply concerned about the urgency of the growing youth mental health crisis and recommend the Board of Supervisors consider providing funding to support youth mental health initiatives, which focus on prevention and early intervention. Funding for these investments should be made in collaboration with the Sacramento County Office of Education to build upon existing school and county investments and address barriers to implementation, and be flexible to allow schools to recruit contractors to implement recommended youth mental health initiatives:

- Youth- and parent-friendly mental health literacy education, including education on how to obtain and maintain good mental health. Youth with higher levels of mental health literacy have reported significantly higher levels of well-being than their counterparts with less or no access to literacy⁸. Further, integrating such education into the curricula will ensure all youth receive necessary health literacy education.
- Training for teachers and staff on mental health screening, prevention, and early intervention practices, including how to refer students for help, to support the development of prevention programs across the county.
- Telehealth mental health services, including access to mindfulness mobile applications, which have been shown to be effective in managing diverse mental health conditions among youth. Online self-help platforms have been identified as the most-frequently used services as they can be accessed by students at their own convenience and provide anonymity that helps to reduce stigma⁹. Kaiser, which made Calm and myStrength applications available to all of its members during the pandemic, found mindfulness-based therapy and cognitive behavior therapy applications to be a useful tool in caring for patients with a variety of mental health disorders, especially when in-person care was limited.
- School-based peer to peer and near peer mentoring programs which leverage trusted peer to peer relationships and build youth capacity to become mental health advocates.

Although we recognize that these initiatives are significant preventive measures, we acknowledge the greater challenge of expanding treatment services in schools. PHAB also supports the Board of Supervisors' goal of increasing partnership and collaboration between managed care plans, county mental health, and local education agencies to bring more school-based mental health treatment services to school sites.

We recommend the Board of Supervisors consider a long-term strategy, in collaboration with managed care plans, county mental health, and the Sacramento County Office of Education, to enhance school-based mental health and substance use disorder prevention and treatment services that builds upon existing investments and programs. This is an opportune time to leverage the significant investments made by the state for youth behavioral health (see attached) and to work together to apply for and access these funds. PHAB is ready to work in partnership with the Board of Supervisors and Sacramento County Office of Education to develop a strategy for future consideration.

Finally, the recommended investments are quick and effective ways to increase access to prevention services for youth. However, the broader issue of increasing access to mental health prevention services for residents of all ages is pivotal to reducing the burden of mental health problems across the county. As a first step to meet this goal, we strongly recommend the Board of Supervisors take this urgently needed step in support of school-based mental health prevention services.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,

F.L. Kaufman

Farla L. Kaufman, PhD MSc MSc
Chair, Public Health Advisory Board
Sacramento County

Citations

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State Investments in Behavioral Health

2021 Budget Act

- Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (\$4.4 billion over 5 years)
 - \$550 million for school-linked behavioral health partnerships
 - \$400 million for Medi-Cal Managed Care Incentive program to increase school-based services
 - \$750 million for a behavioral health services and supports virtual platform that integrates screenings, application-based supports, and direct services.
 - \$429 million for evidence-based interventions and community-defined practices to improve outcomes for children and youth with, or at risk of, behavioral health conditions.
 - \$100 million to implement a comprehensive and culturally- and linguistically-proficient public education and social change campaign on behavioral health.
 - \$448 million for behavioral health workforce, education and training, with funding specifically for school behavioral health counselors.
 - Development of a statewide fee schedule for outpatient behavioral health services provided in school-linked sites.
- Behavioral Health Continuum Infrastructure Program
 - Of the total funding, \$310 million for contracts to qualified entities serving children and youth to expand the community continuum of behavioral health treatment resources, including mobile crisis infrastructure.
- Community Schools (\$2.8 billion)
 - Grants for up to 1,400 local education agencies to convert school campuses into full-service community schools, with mental health, family, and social services
- Mental Health Student Services Act Partnership Grant Program (\$205 million augmentation)
 - Fund partnerships between county behavioral health departments and schools.
- Office of School Health Programs (\$700,000)
 - Maintain an office in the California Department of Education to support school-based Medi-Cal programs and health services.
- Peer Social Media Network (\$5 million)
 - Implement a peer social media network for children and youth who have experienced bullying or who are at risk of bullying.

2022-23 Governor's Budget

- Medi-Cal Provider Equity Payments (\$400 million)
 - Funding for provider payments focused on advancing equity and improving quality in children's preventive, maternity, and integrated behavioral health care.
- 9-8-8 Behavioral Health Crisis Hotline (\$7.5 million)
 - Implement the 9-8-9 call system to increase the ease and accessibility for those experience a behavioral health crisis.