

Florida's Acute Children's Mental Health Crisis

FACH recommends the creation of and funding for a comprehensive strategy to address Florida's children's mental and behavioral health crisis.

The worsening youth mental health crisis: The recent pandemic, isolation from friends and family, effects of parental stress and economic hardship, and loss of loved ones have taken a significant toll on children's mental health. For many children and families, what began as a public health emergency has now become a health crisis.

"Our children lost critical aspects of the environment that support social and developmental function at one of the most important times in their lives," said Daniel Armstrong, Ph.D., a member of the Florida Association of Children's Hospitals (FACH) and respected pediatric psychologist.

The result is rising levels of anxiety and depression in youth, along with self-inflicted injuries – all strong risk factors for suicide. In December 2021, citing mounting evidence of ongoing harm, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory on the mental health challenges confronting youth, a rare warning and call to action to address an emerging crisis.

Unfortunately, Florida has never had a workable, ongoing plan for addressing the mental health needs of children and adolescents. Various institutions have developed plans, and there have been efforts to locally organize and coordinate efforts, but these have only had modest impact on a statewide basis. There never have been adequate resources or staffing, and there has been little coordination across institutions, locales and provider types. Historically, the unique area of children's mental and behavioral health has been handed off to schools, pediatricians, and community agencies with limited options for the child and family.

Expediting a solution for Florida's children: Florida needs a solid statewide system of mental, emotional and behavioral health services for all. Such a system provides early recognition of need and responsive care for children with mental and behavioral health needs; integrates mental health care with primary care services; strengthens care coordination services; promotes access, especially for families and children distant from care sites; and coordinates and supports effective transitions from hospital and emergency care to resources in the community.

Research and data show that 1 in 7 teens nationwide has at least one treatable mental health disorder, but half of them do not receive needed treatment from a mental health professional.¹ Gaps and deficits in mental health services ultimately can lead to increased yet preventable risk for these and other health conditions becoming worse later in life.

Filling the gaps: The continuum of care needed to prioritize prevention and timely access to treatment requires more than just state-level study and involvement. While the pandemic has underscored the gaps in Florida's mental health system for children and youth, it also has revealed ways to address these gaps across public and private borders:

⇒ ***Improving pediatric mental/emotional/behavioral health infrastructure through:***

- Timely access to services
- Expanded telehealth
- Additional outpatient crisis capacity and inpatient care
- Adequate step-down, partial hospitalization, and day programs to bridge inpatient and traditional outpatient/community-based setting

⇒ ***Increasing the availability of mental health practitioners through:***

- Training and development in children's hospitals, pediatric practices and clinics, and in related mental health disciplines providing pediatric behavioral health
- Workforce development in disciplines such as pediatric and family counselors, pediatric social workers, and care coordinators
- Continuing education support for pediatricians, child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, child and adolescent psychologists, advanced pediatric practice nurses, and physician's assistants
- Workforce loan forgiveness to expand the population of pediatric subspecialists and non-physician mental health provides (e.g., psychiatric nurses, social workers, family therapists)

Recommendations for legislative consideration:

Florida Commission on Mental and Behavioral Health

The Florida Association of Children's Hospitals (FACH) recommends that the Florida Commission on Mental and Behavioral Health address mental/behavioral health for children in Florida as a priority through an initiative that will provide the basis for sound policymaking, systemic improvements and appropriations in the future.

Specifically, FACH recommends the Commission take immediate steps to:

- (a) define the scope of pediatric mental/behavioral health needs across regions of the state,
- (b) evaluate modifications of existing pediatric mental/behavioral health resources and networks and determine areas for improved efficiency,
- (c) evaluate innovative solutions using telehealth, tiered levels of intervention, and novel intervention strategies that can be taken to scale once shown to be effective, and
- (d) support expansion of training programs to address a statewide workforce shortage in mental/behavioral health providers at every level.

Advisory Council

We also recommend that the Legislature create a Florida Pediatric Mental Health Advisory Council. This Council could advise on the issues that will need to be addressed, as well as provide some coordination and oversight. Any recommendations by the Council would require the approval of the Department of Health and Legislative funding.

An example that could be replicated is the Genetic and Newborn Screening Advisory Council (GNSAC) which was created by the Legislature in 1980. It is closely linked to CMS and the Department of Health. Although the process is not perfect, Florida has met or exceeded all national standards for genetic care for many years. This program has made it possible for Florida to add various types of screens rapidly,

deliver follow-up care to a diverse population across geography, and to regularly review processes to ensure efficiency and accuracy.

¹ Whitney, DG & Peterson, MD. US National and State-Level Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders and Disparities of Mental Health Care Use in Children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 11/11/19