

Behavioral Health System of Care Act of 2014 (B20-676)

Across the country and in the District, there is a shortage of mental health professionals, which results in long wait times and too many children not getting mental health care until they are in a crisis. Yet, there are many basic mental health issues that pediatric providers can effectively identify and address in primary care settings – with the right support.

The Behavioral Health System of Care Act of 2014 expands mental health access for children through the District's extensive pediatric primary care network. It increases pediatricians' ability to identify and manage basic mental health issues among their patients. It also ensures that children who need to see mental health specialists are quickly and appropriately linked to the proper clinicians and services.

To achieve this, the bill requires the DC Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) to establish a Behavioral Health Access Project to provide timely mental health consultations to pediatric primary care providers. The legislation allows DBH to contract with a non-profit organization to carry out the functions of the Project.

Key Facts

The Behavioral Health Access Project created by this legislation will:

- Assemble a multidisciplinary consultative team consisting of professionals from various fields of mental health to engage with and support pediatricians in diagnosing and treating patients with mild mental health needs;
- Provide consultative and referral services to youth under 22 who exhibit a possible mental health or substance use disorder;
- Provide face-to-face consultations with a patient when a telephone consultation with a physician is not sufficient; and
- Provide care coordinator and facilitated referral services for youth requiring behavioral health treatment.

The estimated cost is \$500,000 per year. This would provide coverage for all pediatric practices in the District. This is based on cost comparisons to other well-run programs throughout the country. Additionally, some or all of the services provided by the Project may be billable to insurance and DBH and the Department of Health Care Finance should be directed to investigate long-term funding strategies for this Project.

Project Background

The design of the Behavioral Health Access Project is based on best practice from around the country. Some 30 states have created child mental health access programs. Many of these initiatives have proven very successful. For example, after the Massachusetts Child Psychiatry Access Project was implemented the number of pediatricians who felt that with existing resources that were usually able to meet the needs of children with psychiatric problems rose from 8% to 63%. This increase in pediatricians who felt they could meet their patients' psychiatric needs was a result of more coordination and better use of existing resources – not from an increase in the number of specialty mental health providers.

The good news is that the District is already making good progress towards establishing a Behavioral Health Access Project. The DC Collaborative for Mental Health in Pediatric Primary Care, a private/public partnership, was launched in 2012 to improve the integration of mental health into pediatric primary care. This group has been working with the Department of Behavioral Health on plans to launch a Behavioral Health Access Project during FY15. In late September, DBH issued a Request for Proposals for a contractor to develop and implement a Mental Health Access in Pediatrics Program which is quite similar to this legislation.

The Time is Now!

Too many District children are languishing without the mental health services they need to fully participate in school and family life – denying them of an opportunity to live a happy, healthy, productive life.

This legislation will ensure the Behavioral Health Access Project is not just a temporary pilot, but instead becomes a permanent part of DC's child mental health system. With very minimal financial cost to the District's budget, it leverages the good work that is underway and codifies it so that thousands of children throughout the District will benefit from this innovative, collaborative program for years to come.