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MAHP Releases Children’s Behavioral Health Report

Report Makes Recommendations to Address the Children’s Behavioral Health Crisis in the Commonwealth.

Boston, MA – The Massachusetts Association of Health Plans (MAHP) has released a report on the current state of children’s behavioral health care in Massachusetts.

The comprehensive report, [Massachusetts Responds to the Crisis in Children’s Behavioral Health](#), includes interviews with over two dozen stakeholders including parent organizations, behavioral health providers, pediatricians, school administrators, advocacy organizations and administration officials. These individuals each outline from their perspective the challenges in delivering behavioral health services to children in the Commonwealth. The report provides a comprehensive set of recommendations based on these interviews, including ensuring state and federal initiatives are fully implemented and innovative programs being developed at the local level are expanded statewide, and better coordinating and organizing the delivery system to focus on upstream services to ensure sufficient capacity to serve children with higher needs. The report will formally be presented at a virtual policy forum hosted by MAHP on Thursday, January 19th.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for children’s behavioral health services here in the Commonwealth. MAHP is pleased to present this comprehensive report that identifies the challenges that parents, providers, advocates and others face in addressing the behavioral health needs of our state’s children. The recommendations contained in the report, if adopted, can provide an important framework to improve access and effectiveness of these critical services,” said Lora Pellegrini, MAHP’s President and CEO. “We look forward to discussing the recommendations with children’s behavioral health experts at our policy forum on January 19th.”

“Across Massachusetts and the nation, children are facing unprecedented behavioral health challenges – only exacerbated by the impacts of the pandemic and widespread workforce shortages,” said Acting Secretary of Health and Human Services Mary Beckman. “We thank MAHP for convening the broad array of perspectives in this report as we work together to ensure equitable and accessible behavioral health care for children across the Commonwealth.”

The report outlines ***eight major areas of concern*** identified by stakeholders, including:

- Lack of connection and coordination among agencies, services, and providers;
- Inadequate availability of crisis services;

- Emergency department boarding;
- Inadequate availability of easily accessed outpatient services;
- Challenges and opportunities for primary care provider integration;
- The uneven and untapped potential for school-based mental health and wellness programs;
- New opportunities for Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI)/Behavioral Health for Children and Adolescents (BHCA) Services; and
- Workforce shortages.

The report provides an overview of state, federal, and private sector initiatives designed to address the areas of concern identified and sets forth recommendations for immediate action to improve children’s behavioral health in the Commonwealth. The recommendations include:

- Fully implementing the Behavioral Health Roadmap as it provides ease of access to care for patients and families and expands the behavioral health system;
- Creating a public education campaign on the availability of urgent care and crisis services;
- Developing and supporting specialty services for children with high-needs;
- Widening the scope of children’s behavioral health programming to incorporate school-based behavioral health;
- Coordinating care for children receiving services from multiple agencies; and
- Integrating behavioral health into pediatric primary care settings.

“Our goal with this report was to better understand the key issues facing the children’s behavioral health system,” said Nancy Lane, an author of the report and Independent Behavioral Health Consultant for Lane Health Consultants. “Through interviews with over 25 behavioral health stakeholders, we learned about the initiatives underway at the state and federal level, and the challenges faced by many of the providers and organizations who serve children and their families. Throughout, we worked to identify concrete recommendations to improve children’s behavioral health in the Commonwealth.”

“With the majority of behavioral health conditions beginning in childhood and adolescence, we have both a responsibility and an opportunity as a society to prioritize the behavioral health needs of children now. I applaud the Massachusetts Association of Health Plans for putting forth solutions that, if adopted, can make a meaningful impact for years to come,” said interviewee Amara Anosike, JD, Director, Behavioral Health Policy & Advocacy, Government Relations at Boston Children’s Hospital.

About MAHP

The Massachusetts Association of Health Plans represents 14 health plans and 2 behavioral health organizations covering more than 3 million Massachusetts residents. It is dedicated to improving health for all in Massachusetts by promoting high-quality, affordable, and equitable health care.

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Statements of Support:

John Crocker, M.Ed., Director of School Mental Health & Behavioral Services, Methuen Public Schools

"As the Behavioral Health Roadmap is brought to fruition, it will be essential to consider schools as the prevention arm of the mental health system *writ large* and the importance of leveraging schools to foster proactive, preventative identification of students with emerging mental health concerns and the delivery of evidence-based mental health services and supports for students. This will require investment in capacity building for schools, both systematically to design comprehensive school mental health systems (CSMHS) to organize and deploy services effectively and supporting school-based mental health staff's professional development to deliver evidence-based therapeutic care to students."

Marcia Fowler, Chief Executive Officer at Bournemouth Health Systems

"It is imperative that we look upstream and direct more resources for screening and prevention in primary care and school settings. Services need to be available for children and families in the communities in which they live, delivered by professionals who represent the many diverse communities in the Commonwealth. The Behavioral Health Roadmap has the promise to accomplish this, and we appreciate the report including a focus on upstream services."

Anne Pelletier Parker, a clinical social worker with more than 40 years of experience in the behavioral health community in Massachusetts, currently working at Advocates in Framingham

"I commend MAHP for this important analysis and the Commonwealth on the multi-faceted interventions currently underway to improve access to behavioral healthcare for youth and families. The prioritization of community-based services that are accessible in residents' homes and municipalities is spot on. It will be critical to not only educate people across the state about the new services that are emerging, but also to ensure they experience them as welcoming, culturally, linguistically sensitive, and recovery- oriented."