

86th Legislature Policy Platform

While Texas historically has had among the lowest per capita funding rate for mental health and substance use disorder services, the Texas Legislature has made great strides in the last several legislative sessions in order to ensure adequate funding for the millions of Texas children and adults who suffer from these illnesses.

For the 86th Legislative Session, NBHP's top issue is to ensure that the Legislature continues to invest in and build out the current capacity of the behavioral health system through a full continuum of care, ranging from prevention and early intervention services to outpatient, community-based services to inpatient and residential services to post-inpatient, long-term care, housing and peer support services. In order to achieve this, we recommend the following:

Increase funding for a broad spectrum of prevention and early intervention activities for mental illness and substance use disorders, including for suicide and opioid overdose prevention.

An estimated 5 million Texans have a mental illness, and 1.2 million have a substance use disorder. The earlier these illnesses are appropriately identified and treated, the better the outcomes can be. In addition, prevention services, including for suicide and opioid overdose prevention, are a far more cost-effective investment than the potential costs of the health care, criminal justice and other systems. Thus, the Legislature should significantly invest in prevention and early intervention behavioral health services to improve both individual and community outcomes.

Improve access to behavioral health services for children, including on school campuses

Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14, and in Texas, almost 15% of students in grades 7-12 misused codeine cough syrup and other opioids. We know that children and adolescents who have behavioral health issues are far more likely than their peers to fail academically, be involved in the criminal justice system, and die by suicide. To effectively address this issue, the Legislature should increase funding for children's behavioral health services, including for those in foster care, and should fund the placement of behavioral health providers on school campuses to ensure that these services are readily available to children and adolescents.

Increase jail diversion options for people with behavioral health issues

On any given day, the Harris County Jail houses more individuals with a mental illness than the entire state mental hospital system and over half of those within the Texas adult criminal justice system are identified as needing some level of substance use disorder treatment. These numbers are similar for youths in the juvenile justice system. The Legislature should continue to invest funds in community-based behavioral health programs that can serve as alternatives to incarceration, as well as re-entry programs that help individuals reintegrate into local communities.

Expand supportive housing and recovery housing options for people with behavioral health issues

In January 2016, one in five people experiencing homelessness had a serious mental illness, and a similar percentage had a chronic substance use disorder. For many people experiencing a behavioral health issue, housing is often the cornerstone of treatment. Without a safe, stable place to live, medication compliance and abstinence from substances can prove difficult. In addition, many who leave acute care treatment need a transitional period of housing and wraparound supports in order to successfully reintegrate back into the community. The Legislature should increase access to both short-term and long-term housing options for this population.

Expand Medicaid or other coverage options for people with behavioral health issues

Texas is home to more uninsured people than any other state, with an uninsured rate of 19%. Individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders who are among the working poor often must choose between meeting their basic needs and paying for health care. Lack of insurance contributes to an overburdened public behavioral health service system and helps to drive overutilization of emergency rooms and acute care. The Legislature should seek to either expand Medicaid or develop a plan that will make free or reduced health care coverage available for adults and their families who currently are ineligible for Medicaid but cannot afford coverage on their own.