

A Call to Crisis: Pennsylvania's Youth with Complex Behavioral Health Needs

Prior to the pandemic, our nation's children and youth were already experiencing a sharp increase in mental, emotional, and behavioral health conditions. COVID-19 has introduced additional and dramatic stress for children and families. This scenario continues to manifest itself in Pennsylvania, as children and families struggle to cope with the various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. One clear issue is the lack of access to much-needed care for youth with complex behavioral health care needs. The impact is felt at both the residential and community-based services level, as agencies cope with workforce staffing shortages, vastly underfunded rate structures, and a residential services continuum that has been critically impacted by restrictive regulatory practices and a systems subset with the desire to reduce the footprint of congregate care.

The confluence of these factors have left many families hopeless as their children languish in emergency rooms, adolescent psychiatric hospitals, and other treatment facilities waiting for beds in appropriate programs. A large majority of these needed beds currently do not exist because these programs are full or current residents cannot be released due to insufficient in-home and community-based services.

RCPA has approached The Department of Human Services (DHS), the HealthChoices Behavioral Health Managed Care Organizations (BH-MCOs), and County Oversight Agencies to address these aforementioned issues. While committed to working on the service gaps, these agencies are hamstrung by the same capacity issues listed above.

RCPA has decided to join forces with the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania (CHOP), and we welcome other supporters to this initiative. We will call on our Pennsylvania General Assembly through an awareness campaign, and potentially utilize hearings to bring stakeholders to the table, to recreate a continuum of care that once existed in Pennsylvania for these vulnerable youths.

On the federal side, there have been bills introduced earlier this year by Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania and Lisa Blunt Rochester of Delaware that begin to address several areas of need:

- [The Children's Mental Health Infrastructure Act of 2021 \(HR 4943\)](#)
- [The Helping Kids Cope Act of 2021 \(HR 4944\)](#)

Additionally, the [Sound the Alarm for Kids campaign](#), recently launched by the Children's Hospital Association (CHA), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and the American Academy for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), is an initiative that provides a wake-up call to America on the teen mental health crisis today.

We hope you will join us in this project to bring awareness, access, and hope to our youth. Please contact RCPA Children's Director [Jim Sharp](#) for more information.