

## Mayoral Priorities for the Behavioral Health System in Philadelphia

### What Kids Need

Children's mental health is an essential piece of overall health and wellness and plays a critical role in a child's ability to succeed in school, at home, and in their community. A mentally healthy childhood means reaching developmental and emotional milestones and learning healthy social skills and healthy coping mechanisms with challenges arise. Mentally healthy children have protective experiences in their life such as healthy nurturing and attachment, parental resilience and concrete supports for parents, and social connections, which lower the risk of negative mental health outcomes for kids. All children in Philadelphia deserve access to quality, universal supports to boost mental health and well-being.

### Why This Matters To Kids, Parents and, The City

In Philadelphia, we are facing the crisis of youth mental health compounded by the gun violence epidemic. The relationship between violence and mental health is well documented, although it has the tendency to be misconstrued in the media. We must be clear in our understanding that mental health challenges do not cause gun violence, but rather gun violence exposure can precipitate mental health challenges. In fact, a person with mental illness is four times more likely to be a victim of a violent crime than a perpetrator. The gun violence that our city's youth is experiencing is of unprecedented proportions, which suggests a severe impact on our children's mental health as a result. In a study conducted by Penn Medicine in 2021 of the 2,629 shooting incidents, 31% had one or more corresponding mental health-related emergency department visits in the 60 days following the shooting.

Twenty-Seven percent of Philadelphia's children are also living in poverty. The experience of childhood poverty is an indicator of poor mental health outcomes. The behavioral health system in our city offers a robust continuum of community-based services designed to meet children and families where they are, in school, at home, or in the neighborhood. Philadelphia has also done tremendous work on the children's crisis treatment continuum, with several child-serving mobile teams, crisis mobile intervention services, and a children's crisis response center. However, our system is designed only to react and respond to urgent mental health needs. A Children First report found that our kids wait an average of 27 days to begin outpatient treatment. We must consider solutions that expand upon our existing system to address access challenges as well as intervene earlier and reach children before their mental health escalates to more acute need. We deserve a system that reaches every child and provides tailored, culturally relevant supports and services regardless of their race, ethnicity, age, neighborhood, insurance status, or citizenship. Given the context of all that our children face growing up in Philadelphia, the mental health needs of our children are paramount.

Philadelphia is positioned to address the growing prevalence of youth behavioral health needs from both a treatment and a prevention approach. Through our unique behavioral health system, we are able to achieve more innovative solutions.

Community Behavioral Health (CBH) is a 501c3 contracted by the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services (DBHIDS) to manage the administration of the HealthChoices Behavioral Health Program of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This partnership is a symbiotic relationship that has led to the creation of cutting-edge programs by using reinvestment funds to meet the needs of the county. We can build on the strengths of our system to eradicate barriers families face in accessing behavioral health supports and improve upon the quality of existing supports.

## The Details

The next mayor must orient behavioral health services around prevention and early identification. The mayor can prioritize universal access to children's mental well-being, including preventive initiatives such as youth mental health first aid. This training, and others, can be implemented in all youth-serving programs under contract with the City of Philadelphia or with the School District. Additionally, the next mayor can expand access to school-based prevention programs through county mental health block grant funding, as well as reinvestment funds from Community Behavioral Health (CBH).

The mayor of Philadelphia has oversight of the single-payer system for behavioral health treatment among Medicaid recipients. The public behavioral health treatment system is in need of increased parameters and metrics that ensure quality services across the continuum of child and adolescent services. Quality services are paramount to ensuring health equity and justice. The mayor will be able to increase quality by increasing transparency in data reporting and metrics so that the public behavioral health system is held to the highest standards of quality that all of our children deserve. Additionally, quality services means building a system that includes diverse behavioral health care providers, reflective of the populations served, providing culturally competent care in the native languages of the recipients.

The next mayor must ensure that Philadelphia's existing behavioral health treatment resources are used in a way that promotes healing-centered engagement. For example, instead of increasing the number of inpatient psychiatric beds for children in Philadelphia, the behavioral health system must focus on community-based clinical approaches such as Family-based services, Intensive Behavioral Health Services, or Blended Case Management. Increasing access to community-based supports will alleviate the need for more acute levels of care. The payment system must reflect adequate measures of both quality and access for behavioral health services for children. The next mayor must decrease the wait-time for behavioral health services for children to no more than five days.

The new mayor must establish a cross-system Children's Mental Health Planning and Implementation Committee.

A coordinated approach at the citywide leadership level will help breakdown systemic silos that create barriers to meeting our children's behavioral health needs. Children First proposes a Mayoral Children's Mental Health Planning and Implementation Committee, which will include all child-serving branches of City government as well as several child-serving agencies, to lead and direct the provision of services to our children. A Children's Cabinet is a collaborative structure that will promote coordination across policies, programming, and processes to strengthen the health and wellbeing of our children.

Understanding the complexities of multiple systems working together, the new administration would be able to prioritize children's mental health initiatives through the committee. The new administration has the opportunity to tangibly improve the lives of Philadelphia's youth by convening a multidisciplinary committee.

## The Details

Goals of the Children's Mental Health Planning and Implementation Committee could include:

- Strengthen partnerships across systems and agencies to meet the needs of our children and young people.
- Resolve policy conflicts, develop mechanisms to share/access information across systems.
- Develop standards of care/best practices to promote healing centered engagement across all child-serving systems and agencies.
- Nurture coordination and communication between multidisciplinary systems within our city.

It is critical that the new mayoral administration takes a comprehensive approach to children's mental health. We believe that everyone plays an instrumental role in creating a culture of health and well-being, including our Parks and Recreation system, the Free Library system, the Out-of-School Time providers, and the education system.

Relatedly, the mayor has the ability to appoint members of the school board. The next mayor must appoint school board members who will advance access to mental health services within schools, including not just access to treatment services, but prevention and intervention supports as well. Additionally, school board members must be committed to the current school-based mental health efforts in our school district – Supportive Therapeutic Educational Partnerships (STEP), Intensive Behavioral Health Services (IBHS), restorative justice, and healing-centered engagement implementation that will begin this summer.

Moreover, the new mayor can ensure that students who are uninsured or underinsured have access to behavioral health services by using the county mental health block grant to fund services. Philadelphia offers a robust array of behavioral health services for children in school and in the community; unfortunately, these services are only available to those who are insured through Medical Assistance (Medicaid). The Migration Policy Institute estimates that there are 4,000 children who are undocumented in Philadelphia. Additionally, many CHIP or commercial plans do not cover behavioral health services equally to Medicaid, leaving children underinsured. Investing in children without insurance or with insufficient insurance will increase access to school-based behavioral health supports for vulnerable youth.

Finally, the next mayor must address the mental health needs of children 0-5 years old. The current Early Intervention system is insufficient to meet the needs of children who have early warning signs of mental health challenges. In order to end the school-to-prison pipeline, we must intervene earlier and address the needs of children in early childhood learning spaces. To address this population, more resources and capacity must be built in Philadelphia's Early Intervention system. Additionally, the EI system must treat not just the child, but their family/system of support holistically.

## About Children First

Childhood is fleeting, there are no do-overs. That's why we apply pressure to government officials to persuade them to do what is necessary to give every child the basic ingredients for a lifetime of success. Formerly known as Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), Children First continues the 40+ years of advocacy on behalf of children and families in southeastern PA. Our job as parents, neighbors, and members of the community is to make sure every child has the fundamental building blocks for success including health care, high-quality education from pre-k through high school, proper nutrition, and a dependable support network to help them grown into healthy, able, and confident adults.