

MMHPI COVID-19 Response Briefings

Personal Protective Equipment and the Behavioral Health Workforce

March 23, 2020 Version

Background

The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (MMHPI), with its dedicated program for the Texas Gulf Coast, The Hackett Center for Mental Health (The Hackett Center), is developing a series of briefings for policymakers related to behavioral health service delivery during the COVID-19 crisis.

This briefing focuses on the need for personal protective equipment for the behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disability (IDD) workforce and is based on input from providers across Texas, facilitated by the Texas Council of Community Centers (Texas Council), which represents the interests of the 39 Community Centers across Texas that form the state's safety net for the delivery of mental health, substance use disorder (SUD), and IDD services; and the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (Texas Alliance), which represents the interests of more than 140 child, youth, and family service providers across Texas in the child welfare and broader children's mental health systems.

Policy Recommendation

A subset of the behavioral health workforce currently serving (1) adults with severe mental illness at substantial risk for re-hospitalization or involvement in the criminal justice system, (2) adults and youth with severe SUD needs at risk of institutionalization, (3) children and families currently or recently involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and at risk for institutional placement, and (4) people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who may also have behavioral health conditions, should be prioritized for use of personal protective equipment (PPE) as these workers must deliver certain critical in-person services in order to allow for these high-risk individuals with complex health needs to be served in the community, rather than already over-burdened hospitals, residential facilities, and justice facilities.

Rationale

When we think of protecting workers from COVID-19 exposure and infection, the workers that most often come to mind are emergency medical services (EMS), law enforcement, and hospital personnel. However, a subset of workers in the mental health, SUD, IDD community services, and child welfare systems also provide front-line, in-person services that are critical to serving thousands of high-need Texans in their communities rather than institutional settings. During the COVID-19 crisis, PPE is essential for enabling these personnel to perform their

essential functions to deliver mental health, SUD, child welfare, and IDD services. The work done by these essential personnel puts them directly in harm's way, with the potential for interaction with infected people and infectious environments.

Although many mental health, SUD, child welfare, and IDD services are being converted to telehealth or telephone-based care, a substantial subset of people with the most severe mental illnesses and SUD, and children and families involved in the child welfare and IDD systems, require face-to-face visits to maintain stability and community tenure. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Adults with serious mental illness on injectable medications such as antipsychotic drugs;
- Adults with serious mental illness who need people to check on them in their homes in order to ensure that they take medications and have adequate functional supports to avoid re-hospitalization or incarceration;
- Adults and children who are in psychiatric crisis and require services in, for example, crisis stabilization units, extended observations units, community hospitals, crisis respite, and crisis residential services;
- Adults and children with SUD needing – or at risk of needing – detoxification given their high risk for withdrawal complications, and those needing group living for maintaining sobriety and avoiding re-institutionalization;
- Children and youth at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, or violence in their homes who would otherwise require residential care in the absence of intensive community-based support; and
- Adults, children, and youth with IDD who reside in group homes that serve as alternatives to institutional care.

Committed community-based organizations continue to deliver these services today with little to no protective equipment as the supplies they had on hand have quickly depleted. Texas needs to prioritize access to PPE for staff at community mental health centers, SUD provider agencies, child welfare contractors, and IDD services providers, just like hospital and first responder personnel. The services these workers provide are critical, now more than ever, and we cannot have them becoming sick or quitting their jobs because of the risk of becoming infected, otherwise critical services will not be delivered and more Texans with severe behavioral health needs will need to enter over-burdened institutional settings, compounding the risks of the virus spreading more quickly. We must ensure that critical and essential mental health, SUD, child welfare, and IDD services continue to be delivered uninterrupted during the COVID-19 crisis.