

2020-2021 State Budget Request: Telehealth Guidelines to Support School-Based Mental & Behavioral Health

Summary

The Children's Partnership (TCP) requests that the California Department of Education (CDE) with the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) issue guidelines to support school-based mental and behavioral health care provided via telehealth – care that is especially relevant during times of crisis like what we are experiencing with COVID-19. With a one-time \$300,000 budget allocation from the general fund, CDE and DHCS will be able to support the advancement of innovative and accessible models for mental and behavioral health care for California's public-school students. This allocation is necessary for the implementation of AB 2315 (Quirk-Silva), enacted in 2018, to support the development of guidelines for school-based mental and behavioral health care provided via telehealth. These guidelines will provide the necessary guidance for schools to offer services via telehealth, a modality that is particularly relevant during this unprecedented and uncertain time. When children return to school, our schools need to be equipped with the tools and processes necessary to deal with the impacts this crisis may have had on their mental and behavioral health in order to fully support academic success.

Background

California, and the entire country, is in the midst of a youth mental health crisis as rates of depression, suicide, and self-harm among young people have increased; a crisis that may be further exacerbated by the period of isolation and uncertainty caused by COVID-19. In 2017, suicide was the second most common cause of death among young people aged 15 to 24 across the country.¹ In California, the proportion of adolescents experiencing a major depressive episode increased from 8.7% to 12.3% between 2011 and 2015.²

Innovative strategies that break down barriers to accessing supportive services are necessary to improve the mental health of young people. This includes uplifting strategies that leverage technological solutions to meet young people where they are: at school and in their community.

Over 6 million children attend one of California's public schools each day. Schools have a significant role to play and a strong incentive in promoting the health of children—whether it be via health education, the presence of school nurses, the establishment of school-based health centers, or other avenues. Research shows that children who are physically and mentally healthy perform better academically and miss fewer days of school. Yet we know most schools in the state do not have the resources to meet all of their pupils' physical, mental, and behavioral health care needs.

Currently, only two percent of schools in California have a school-based health center.³ Only 43 percent of public-school districts have nurses. Statewide on average, there is only one nurse for every 2,784 students, and the ratio is much worse in many regions.⁴ Meanwhile, the American

¹ "Death Rates due to Suicide and Homicide Among Persons Aged 10-24: United States, 2000-2017." National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief No. 352, October 2019. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

² Mental Health and Substance Use: A Crisis for California's Youth." California Healthcare Almanac, California Healthcare Foundation. December 2018.

³ California Children's Report Card: A Review of Kids' Well-Being and Roadmap for the Future." Children Now, 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

Academy of Pediatrics recommends that there be a minimum of one full-time registered nurse in every school.⁵

As students across California continue to face challenges in accessing mental and behavioral health care in their communities, schools are singularly well positioned to help fill gaps in access to care. Strengthening school capacity in this area includes efforts to increase the availability of nurses and the workforce to care for children and also the use of technology to bolster the availability of services, particularly during times of crisis like we are in today. The school-based telehealth model is an evidence-supported opportunity to connect more children with the care they need at the schools they attend each day. School-based telehealth models have proven effective in several sites throughout the country⁶ and in 2018, the legislature and Governor signaled their commitment to this strategy with the passage of AB 2315 (Quirk-Silva). However, successful implementation of this law requires dedicated funding.

Budget Language Request

TCP requests that language be included in the 2020-2021 State Budget for one-time budget allocation of \$300,000 for CDE to hire two positions to consult with DHCS and convene appropriate stakeholders, including the Medi-Cal for Students workgroup⁷, to support the availability of telehealth guidelines for school-based mental and behavioral health services.

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⁵ "Policy Statement: Role of the School Nurse in Providing School Health Services. The American Academy of Pediatrics, June 2016.

⁶ "Roadmap for Action: Advancing the Adoption of Telehealth in Child Care Centers and Schools to Promote Children's Health and Well-Being." The Children's Partnership, August 2018.

⁷ The Medi-Cal for Students Workgroup was established by Senate Bill 75 in 2019. For more information, see <https://www.medi-calforstudents.org>