

September 23, 2024

Meeting Date: September 24, 2024
Agenda Item No. 12
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Board of Supervisors
County of San Diego
1600 Pacific Highway
San Diego, CA 92101

RE: Supporting Board Item 12: Creating A Children, Youth, And Transition Age Youth Behavioral Health Continuum Framework for San Diego County

Dear Honorable Members of the Board,

As the Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry for Rady Children's Hospital – San Diego, I am writing to express strong support for County Supervisor Lawson-Remer's proposal to create a comprehensive child and youth behavioral health continuum framework for San Diego County. With over 40 locations in San Diego and Riverside, Rady Children's provides care to the majority of children and adolescents in our region. Last year alone, we served more than 270,000 children, giving us a front-row view of the growing mental health crisis.

The statistics are staggering at Rady Children's, we have experienced a 1,700% increase in emergency room visits related to mental health crises. Statewide, between 2016 and 2020, the percentage of children between the ages of 2 and 17 diagnosed with anxiety or depression increased by 70%. Mental health issues are now the number one reason children in California are hospitalized, and tragically, suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents.

This is why early intervention is so critical. Pediatricians often identify early signs of anxiety or depression in their young patients—signs that, if untreated, can lead to disruptive behaviors that affect their education, relationships, and overall safety. Yet, despite our best efforts, the demand for mental health services far exceeds the available capacity. Parents who are unable to access timely services often turn to hospitals, including our emergency department, in moments of crisis.

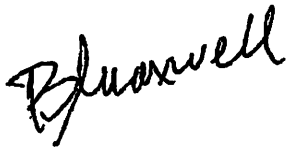
The outpatient clinics, school-based programs, and community providers that offer mental health services frequently have waitlists extending several months. Families face numerous challenges, including long waits, difficulties navigating the healthcare system, insurance barriers, and the stigma of seeking mental health care. A more typical healthcare experience leaves families overwhelmed and without timely access to care.

At Rady Children's, we've seen promising results through our pilot program that integrates mental health clinicians into pediatric primary care practices, providing same-day access to mental health services. This approach is life-changing for families, yet policy and reimbursement barriers make it difficult to scale up and implement more broadly as a standard of care.

We are encouraged by the Supervisor's vision and believe this framework will provide a much-needed comprehensive analysis of the children's mental health system of care in San Diego County. Identifying gaps in services and assessing current capacity will be critical to shaping future county investments and policy decisions. Rady Children's stands ready to contribute our expertise and collaborate on this important effort to ensure that every child in San Diego receives the right care at the right time.

We look forward to working alongside County staff to create a more robust and accessible behavioral health system for our youth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Maxwell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter "B" being large and prominent.

Benjamin Maxwell, M.D.
Chief of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego

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County of San Diego
1600 Pacific Highway
San Diego, CA, 92101

RE: Supporting Board Item 12: Creating A Children, Youth, And Transition Age Youth Behavioral Health Continuum Framework for San Diego County

Dear Honorable Members of the Board,

As a Pediatrician, committed to the well-being of children and their families, I see firsthand the immense challenges our children and youth face in accessing mental and behavioral health services. Although these challenges are not new, they have reached an alarming crisis point that demands immediate attention and action.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Children's Hospital Association declared a national emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Mental health issues are the number one reason California kids are hospitalized. Currently, death by suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents. When mental health outpatient or community-based services are unavailable, families are often left with the emergency department (ED) as their only option. However, EDs are not equipped to handle the ongoing mental health needs of children, leading to inappropriate care settings and added stress for both families and healthcare providers. Sadly, I have seen far too many children stuck in this cycle, waiting for appointments with specialists while their mental health needs intensify and deteriorate.

It is important to recognize that behavioral / mental health is treated differently in our system than physical health. Take a relatively common condition like diabetes. A patient can see their doctor, get evaluated with a lab test, and often receive insulin the very same day. All this care is covered by insurance. In contrast, when a child is suffering from a mental health issue, parents often don't know where to find help, are faced with many hours leaving voice mails that are not returned, missing days of work / school and often appropriate care is either not covered or involves months long waiting lists. In addition, many Pediatricians lack the specialized training to address these complex needs.

However, innovative models of care are making a difference. Children's Primary Care Medical Group (CPCMG) has 28 offices across San Diego and Riverside Counties. We have over 160 primary care clinicians (MD/DO/NP/PA) and care for ~ 280,000 patients. In addition, we are the largest safety net medical care provider in the state of California. CPCMG screens children and adolescents for potential mental health issues during well child and sick visits. Under the Rady Children's Transforming Mental Health Initiative, established in 2020, primary care providers received specific education regarding the screening, diagnosis, care plan creation and medication management for the most common diagnoses: ADHD, Anxiety and Depression. Children and teens identified as struggling with depression, anxiety, traumatic events, disordered eating, school challenges or in the early stages of a mental health concern are supported immediately within the primary care office. Currently, in collaboration with Rady Children's Hospital – San

Diego, seven CPCMG clinics have an embedded therapist as part of the Primary Care Mental Health Integration (PCMHI) program. At these clinics, patients and families can speak with a mental health professional in the same office—often on the same day.

The preliminary results of the PCMHI program are incredibly promising. Among patients that screened positive for depression, 70% demonstrated a decrease in depression category, and among patients that screened positive for anxiety, 69% had a decrease in level of anxiety. These improvements underscore how critical it is to integrate mental health care within primary care settings, ensuring that children and adolescents get the help they need quickly and efficiently. CPCMG's whole-child care approach eliminates the burden on families to navigate unfamiliar mental health resources, where they would often face months-long wait times.

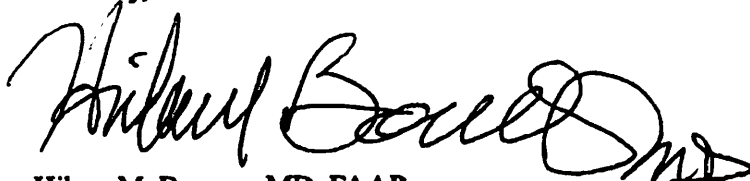
While we are encouraged by the success of the PCMHI pilot program, bringing it to scale remains a challenge. There are significant policy and reimbursement barriers that prevent this model from being adopted more broadly as a standard of care at this time. However, this approach is working, can be life-changing for both parents and children, and has the potential to transform how we address youth mental health at a critical moment in their development.

Children's Primary Care Medical Group strongly supports the *Children, Youth, and TAY Behavioral Health Continuum Framework* proposed by Supervisor Lawson-Remer. We are hopeful that this framework will help address the barriers outlined—expanding access to behavioral / mental health services, reducing delays in care, and strengthening the mental health workforce. We are optimistic that this proposal will lay the groundwork for meaningful improvements in the behavioral / mental health care system for San Diego's youth.

We are ready to collaborate with the County and community partners to advance these goals and ensure that our children receive the timely, life-changing care they deserve.

Thank you for your leadership and dedication to building a healthier future for our children and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hilary Bowers MD". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the "MD" at the end being more distinct.

Hilary M. Bowers, MD, FAAP
Director of Behavioral and Mental Health Services
Children's Primary Care Medical Group (CPCMG)