

# Increasing Access to Behavioral Health Care Providers in South Carolina



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A lack of access to behavioral<sup>a</sup> health care is a well-documented deficit experienced by Palmetto State residents for many years. Data demonstrates that many communities across South Carolina cannot meet the behavioral health needs of their residents. According to Mental Health America's 2021 report, "The State of Mental Health in America," South Carolina ranks 40th out of 51 states and DC in "mental health workforce availability."<sup>1,b</sup>

Limited access to mental health care is cross-cutting across all sectors of society. The ripple effect of these circumstances impact patients' children, families and communities; limiting productivity and creating a cycle of mental health illnesses for those impacted. With the stressors caused by the Coronavirus Pandemic, the need for access to services is at an all-time high.<sup>2</sup> According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, "The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected many people's mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance use disorders."<sup>3</sup> In a July poll, 53% of U.S. adults "reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. This is significantly higher than the 32% reported in March."<sup>4</sup>

There are several policy opportunities to decrease barriers to care by making the licensing and credentialing processes more efficient and putting professionals to work faster so they can support the behavioral health needs of South Carolinians.

## Opportunities to remove licensing and credentialing barriers for social workers, marriage and family therapists and licensed professional counselors in South Carolina:

- 1 Make permanent the temporary modifications to policies to reimburse telehealth and telephonic services for established patients put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>
- 2 Create a standardized credentialing process for South Carolina that allows behavioral health providers to maintain their credentials so they can maintain payor reimbursement when they change employers within the state.
- 3 Participate in reciprocal agreements with neighboring states to allow behavioral health providers to work in South Carolina when the demand for providers outstrips supply.
- 4 Collaborate with other states to create one licensure process for each of the following disciplines: LMFTs, LSWs and LPCs.

<sup>a</sup> According to the Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Behavioral health is defined as mental health care and substance use disorder treatment.

<sup>b</sup> Mental health workforce availability is the ratio of the county population to the number of mental health providers including psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, counselors, marriage and family therapists and advanced practice nurses specializing in mental health care. In 2015, marriage and family therapists and mental health providers that treat alcohol and other drug abuse were added to this measure. Survey data year: 2018.

## References

- 1 "Mental Health in America - Data." Mental Health America. Accessed December 5, 2019. <https://www.mhanational.org/research-reports/2021-state-mental-health-america>
- 2 Panchal, Nirmita, Rabah Kamal, Kendal Orgera, Cynthia Cox, Rachel Garfield, Liz Hamel, Cailey Muñana and Priya Chidambaram. The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use. Kaiser Family Foundation. August 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>
- 3 Panchal et al., "The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use." Kaiser Family Foundation. August 2020.
- 4 Panchal et al., "The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use." Kaiser Family Foundation. August 2020.
- 5 "Medicaid Bulletin." South Carolina Healthy Connections Medicaid. South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, March 28, 2020. [https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/SCDHHS/2020/03/28/file\\_attachments/1413721/%282020-03-28%29%20COVID%20TH%20BH%20Bulletin.pdf](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/SCDHHS/2020/03/28/file_attachments/1413721/%282020-03-28%29%20COVID%20TH%20BH%20Bulletin.pdf)