

THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH PLAYBOOK

# Emergency Response:

## Policy and Funding Solutions to Combat the Youth Mental Health Crisis



Children's Hospital Colorado



PARTNERS FOR  
Children's Mental Health



COLORADO ASSOCIATION FOR  
**SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CARE**

**Colorado Chapter**

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



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COLORADO**

# State of Emergency for Youth Mental Health

*Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, children and youth were increasingly facing mental health challenges. In 2015, 1 in 3 Colorado youth reported feeling sad or hopeless for two or more weeks compared to 1 in 4 youth just two years prior.<sup>1</sup> Suicide is now the leading cause of death among Colorado youth ages 10-24.<sup>2</sup>*

Most states, including Colorado, have a severe shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists, leading to access-to-care gaps for children and youth.<sup>3</sup> Only 22% of youth who have a mental illness with severe impairment are receiving care.<sup>4</sup> Prevention and early identification of behavioral health concerns are incredibly important, yet two-thirds of pediatricians nationwide report a lack of training in treatment of children's behavioral health needs.<sup>5</sup>

The COVID-19 epidemic has only exacerbated these concerns due to physical isolation, ongoing uncertainty, fear, and grief. More than 140,000 U.S. children have experienced the death of a primary or secondary caregiver during the pandemic. There have been many weeks when suicide is the chief behavioral

health complaint in Children's Hospital Colorado's emergency rooms. From January to May 2021, Children's Colorado saw a 73% increase in mental health visits to the emergency department compared to 2019. The Pediatric Mental Health Institute at Children's Hospital Colorado has seen two to three times more patients reporting anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation. Community pediatricians are also reporting that their patients are presenting with increased mental health needs. In May 2021, with children, families, schools, county governments and healthcare providers at their breaking points, [Children's Hospital Colorado declared a state of emergency for youth mental health.](#)

1 in 3

Colorado youth reported feeling sad or hopeless for two or more weeks



22%

Youth who have a mental illness with severe impairment are receiving care

2/3

Pediatricians nationwide report a lack of training in treatment of children's behavioral health needs

140,000+

U.S. children have experienced the death of a primary or secondary caregiver during the pandemic

# Solutions

Government officials at the local, state and federal level have a responsibility, in partnership with families, healthcare providers, advocates and schools, to urgently prioritize mental health policies and funding that will support children, youth and families.

## Local Policy Solutions

### Federal funding with a local impact

Cities and counties are direct beneficiaries of federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding. The Governor's FY22-23 budget request also includes \$175 million for local communities to use as matching funds for initiatives. Local governments have opportunities to target ARPA funding to address children's mental health from prevention to treatment and recovery.

- Logan County has committed to using ARPA funding to hire student success coaches who will help support children struggling with mental health issues in schools.
- Aurora is considering an ordinance that will create a board to allocate ARPA funding to community mental health providers and programs.

### Local infrastructure for sustainable funding

Communities can refer local tax measures to voters to provide sustainable funding for children and youth mental health.

- In 2017, Eagle County voters passed a sales tax on recreational marijuana purchases that provides over \$500,000 in funding each year for mental health resources.
- In 2019, voters in Denver increased the sales tax by 0.25 percent to raise approximately \$45 million per year for mental health services.

### Additional solutions that can be supported by ARPA or other local funding

#### Keeping kids safe at home

- **Respite:** Local governments can invest in respite care providers and programs to offer short-term support for caregivers with children and youth who have more complicated mental health needs.
- **In-home crisis response services:** Local services can be utilized to stabilize children and youth in the home setting while additional longer-term needs and services are assessed and identified.
- **Prevention measures:** Local governments can establish prevention programs to limit access to potentially lethal items such as the distribution of voluntary lock boxes to secure items away from children and youth in the home, and the expansion of prescription drug drop-off sites in the community.
- **Co-responder programs:** Establishing local programs that enable a mental health crisis intervention team to work in partnership with local Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in responding to emergency calls in the community.





## State Policy Solutions

### Prioritize children and youth mental health federal funding investments

We applaud Colorado Governor Jared Polis and legislative leadership for declaring in May that they intended to **allocate \$550 million in one-time ARPA funding for mental health needs for Coloradans**. An initial \$100 million was spent during the 2021 legislative session on critical needs. A Behavioral Health Transformational Task Force is currently considering how to allocate the remaining \$450 million.

- Given the lifelong value of prevention and early intervention, children and young adults should ideally get extra investments in their early years. **By allocating one-third, or \$150 million, of the funds to this population, leaders can ensure that young people receive at least proportional funding, given that those under age 24 make up 31% of the Colorado population.**<sup>6</sup>
- A coalition of children, youth and family advocates [sent a letter](#) to lawmakers outlining a specific list of policy and funding priorities.

### Ensure the new Behavioral Health Administration (BHA) is child-focused

The BHA will play a key role in ensuring equitable access to mental health services for children and youth. To that end, in designing the new agency, the legislature must include a children and youth infrastructure that is accountable for services, policy, and strategy for children and youth, regardless of insurance status. This will require strong integration with and accountability for both Medicaid and private insurance.



# Federal Policy Solutions

## Robust support for children and youth mental health in the Build Back Better Act

Several bills have been introduced that would facilitate a critically needed, generational investment in response to the youth mental health state of emergency. Provisions of these bill must be incorporated into the Build Back Better Act or a bipartisan legislative package before year's end:

- The Children's Mental Health Infrastructure Act of 2021 (H.R. 4943) would provide \$2 billion a year for five years for grants to children's hospitals for increasing their capacity to provide pediatric mental health services.
- The Helping Kids Cope Act of 2021 (H.R. 4944) would provide \$500 million a year for five years to support grants to children's hospitals and other providers to support pediatric mental health care integration and coordination. The bill would also provide \$100 million annually for five years for grants to children's hospitals and other providers to support workforce training for a range of pediatric mental health professionals.

## Safeguard access to children and youth mental health services in the long term

- Permanent extension of funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which provides comprehensive and affordable healthcare to over 6 million children nationwide.
- Enable 12 months of continuous eligibility for children and new mothers under Medicaid.
- Additional funding for the Children's Hospitals Graduate Medical Education (CHGME) program to address the shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists.

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH  
INFRASTRUCTURE ACT OF 2021

# \$2 Billion

Each year for five years for grants to children's hospitals for increasing their capacity to provide pediatric mental health services.

HELPING KIDS COPE  
ACT OF 2021

# \$500 Million

Each year for five years to support grants to children's hospitals and other providers to support pediatric mental health care integration and coordination.



