



The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is the voice of the community on issues related to the quality and responsiveness of mental health and substance abuse disorder services.

Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force
Testimony to Milwaukee County Board – October 30, 2020
Priorities for 2021 Milwaukee County Budget

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Thank you for the opportunity to share the Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force priorities for the 2021 Milwaukee County Budget.

The Milwaukee Mental Health Task (MMHTF) works collaboratively to identify issues faced by people affected by mental illness and by substance abuse disorders, facilitate improvements in services, give consumers and families a strong voice, reduce stigma, and implement recovery principles. The MHTF is a coalition of over 40 community organizations and includes service providers, individuals who live with a mental illness or substance use disorder, advocates, family members, and other stakeholders.

The MMHTF has a strong commitment to addressing racial disparities in access to mental health services, and to advancing equity. Thank you to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors and to County Executive Crowley, for your vision of achieving racial equity to become the healthiest county in Wisconsin. We thank Chairwoman Nicholson for her amendment to enhance investments in equity.

We recognize that the 2021 budget is being crafted during a time of extraordinary fiscal challenges due to the pandemic, and extraordinary challenges facing the community as we strive to dismantle systemic racism in our community. Milwaukee County plays a vitally important role in providing a safety net for our most vulnerable community members including many people who live with a mental illness or substance use disorders, as well as other disabilities. Many of these individuals are at higher risk for COVID 19. In addition, stress of the pandemic and systemic racism has also had significant mental health repercussions.

On behalf of the MMHTF and our members, we ask you to protect the services and supports that are vital to children and adults with mental health needs, substance use disorder, and other disabilities and advance recovery and independence, including the following:

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

The Department of Health Services is an essential part of the safety net for Milwaukee County residents who live with a mental illness or substance use disorder. We ask policy makers to prioritize DHHS services at this challenging time in our community.

Disability Services Department

The budget includes a proposal to merge the Milwaukee County Disability Resource Center and the Milwaukee County Aging Resource Center. The DRC and ARC are important resources for people with mental illness and other disabilities. We believe a merger has the potential to provide more holistic access to services and sharing of resources, and to strengthen coordination of resources. However, we have also heard concerns from community members who are surprised by this proposal and disappointed that there was not consultation with stakeholders on making such an important decision. Implementation of such a significant change should be done in consultation and collaboration with stakeholders – community members who use these essential services, as well as advocates and service providers. We ask Milwaukee County to ensure equity and respect for the voices of people with disabilities in this system change: *Nothing about us without us.*

Youth with Mental Health Needs

The Mental Health Task Force supports effort by DHHS to provide a “No Wrong Door” to services for children with mental health needs and other disabilities, and to expand the number of children enrolled in the state’s Children’s Long Term Support program, (CLTS).

The Mental Health Task Force supports efforts to reduce the number of Milwaukee youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake and to invest instead in community based support and evidence based programming and treatment. The majority of youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake have mental health needs, elevating the importance of prevention and early intervention. Dollars saved from transition of youth at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake should be invested in community supports and services.

Department on Aging.

The Mental Health Task Force supports the proposed establishment of three direct service positions, an Elder Benefits Specialist, and two additional Aging Resource Center staff. We anticipate that a high percentage of the elders who utilize these services will have co-occurring mental health needs and would benefit from benefits counselling and ARC support.

Housing and Emergency Shelters

The Mental Health Task Force strongly supports the work of the Housing Division and asks policy makers to prioritize it in the budget, including the proposed Rapid Rehousing Rent Assistance initiative Housing First is an evidence based practice which has had a tremendous positive impact for Milwaukee County residents with mental illness. Recovery is not possible without stable safe housing. We ask policy makers to continue to prioritize support for the emergency shelter network. Even in a Housing First model of service, it is extremely important that Emergency Shelters remain a part of the continuum, giving literally homeless individuals a place to go as they are in the process of being housed.

Behavioral Health Division

County Budget funding is critical to sustaining mental health and substance use disorder services for children and adults in our community. The budget approved by the Mental Health Board reduces tax levy by \$2.5 million to meet budget targets. While understanding the difficult fiscal environment, we also see that the pandemic has increased the need for the important services administered by BHD and ask that every effort be made to ensure these reductions are short term. We support the investments proposed in the 2021 BHD budget including the following:

- Funding for a new high-fidelity Assertive Community Treatment team. This will leverage grant funding award from SAMHSA, and will provide wraparound support for adults with severe mental illness who have the most significant needs for support.
- Additional funding for supportive employment services. COVID-19 has increased the already high rates of unemployment for Wisconsinites who have a mental illness.
- Additional funding for AODA services including Medication – assisted Treatment. COVID-19 has also contributed to an increase in the number of people needing treatment for substance use.
- Funding for Crisis Stabilization Housing redesign, for community members who needed additional support following a psychiatric hospitalization.
- Funding to support placement of county staff in Federally Qualified Health Centers to expand and improve access to services, but co-locating mental health services with trusted community partners.

Transportation

Access to transportation, both transit and paratransit, is vital for people with mental illness and other disabilities, as so many do not drive due to their disability or because they cannot afford a car. Transit and paratransit are critical to their ability to live independently and to access disability related services, get to jobs, grocery shopping, participate in support groups, attend recovery programs, worship, etc.

We are heartened to see that the proposed budget does not include any major changes or reductions of paratransit or to the fixed route service, in large part due to support from CARES Act funding. We will continue to advocate at the state level for increased funding for transit and paratransit.

Paratransit is vital to the ability of people with disabilities and frail elders to thrive in the community and is an essential service for a vulnerable population. We continue to hear concerns from riders about the timeliness and quality of paratransit services and ask policymakers to provide independent oversight and accountability.

Office of the Sheriff

The Mental Health Task Force strongly recommends that the Sheriff's budget include funding to support crisis intervention training for the Sheriff's department. Given the high percentage of people with mental illness in the justice system, there is an urgent need to train staff to better understand mental illness, de-escalation, access to care, and how to respond to symptoms. CITs help reduce crisis situations, improve safety, and promote better outcomes for persons with mental illness. The Task Force also supports plans to establish CART team for a coordinated effort by a clinician and law enforcement to respond to individuals with mental health needs who may be in crisis. In addition, we support continued funding of Jail Population Analyst to support system reforms advanced as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge.

House of Correction

The Mental Health Task Force supports the changes to work release in the budget, which would eliminate the use of the HOC to house people overnight if they are eligible for work, and to use electronic monitoring. This approach provides continued accountability for people serving sentences, while increasing opportunities for more inmates to obtain and maintain employment. Long term, this policy has the potential to decrease recidivism and increase opportunities for justice involved individuals to be contributing members of our community.

Addressing Fiscal Challenges

The budget proposes a new Grant Procurement division that will address Milwaukee County's Fiscal challenges by working to identify, apply for, and track grants from the County's state, federal and non-profit partners. The Mental Health Task Force supports this investment which has the potential to cover costs and bring in needed funding to continue essential services and invest in equity.

Decreasing Revenue: Fair Deal Proposal

Milwaukee County's ability to generate revenue is limited by state laws. This restriction has limited funding for vital services, as well funding for urgently needed repairs to crumbling infrastructure and to invest in the future. The Mental Health Task Force supports the Milwaukee County Fair Deal Proposal to address the need for additional revenue and equity.

Thank you for considering these recommendations and for all you do to maintain vital services in Milwaukee County. We thank you for your leadership in protecting these essential services in the 2021 Milwaukee County budget.

For questions about this testimony, please contact Mental Health Task Force Coordinator Barbara Beckert, barbara.beckert@drwi.org at 414-292-2724.