



The Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force is committed to being a leader in identifying issues faced by all people affected by mental illness, facilitating improvements in mental health services, giving consumers and families a strong voice, reducing stigma, and implementing recovery principles.

Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force Testimony Milwaukee County Mental Health Board Meeting

**Delivered by Moriah Iverson – MHTF Steering Committee Member
June 15, 2021**

Thank you, Chairman Lutzow and members of the Milwaukee County Mental Health Board (MCMHB) for this opportunity to comment on the Behavioral Health Division's 2022 Priorities for the Annual Budget.

The Mental Health Task (MHTF) Force surveyed its members and other community stakeholders and, based on the feedback received, the MHTF would like to summarize the findings. The MHTF recognizes that the allocation of scarce resources is a significant concern for the county as whole. We offer these suggestions for your consideration based on the survey ranking of services to prioritize over the 2022 budget year are:

1. Mobile Crisis 81%
2. Youth Mental Health Services 80%
3. Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Treatment for Adults 77%
4. SUD Treatment for Youth 75%

A greater emphasis on the provision of mental health and SUD services to youth addresses issues earlier in life that may mitigate adverse experiences that impact their potential to thrive. This is critical for their well-being as they enter adulthood.

Survey respondents offered ideas for saving money and improving efficiencies. Some ideas that were frequently mentioned were:

- Reduce the multiple administrative layers of staff at BHD.
- Review service provision to eliminate duplication of care.
- Consider value-based payment to providers that emphasizes quality of care.
- Focus on prevention and early intervention to reduce high cost, deep end services.

These are difficult budget times for all agencies, including the county. The county may wish to conduct a utilization review or time study to determine the necessity of the multiple layers of administrative oversight and its benefit to taxpayers.

The feedback offered on the Mental Health Emergency Center included:

- Share the operations plan, or model of care, with stakeholders and the community.
 - Please identify what services will be offered to those who do not require hospitalization.
 - Communication is so critical for success, what is the plan for shared information?
 - How will the county ensure diversity of revenue streams?

- That all individuals who access care receive a safety plan upon discharge.
- A plea to not deny services when someone needs care.

Respondents felt that there are many unanswered questions for such an integral component of care in our community. Please take action to ensure robust and ongoing community engagement in the planning and development of the Center, and in its operation moving forward. The MHTF supports establishment of a community advisory board to provide this important perspective.

Individuals with mental health and substance use disorders are overrepresented in our criminal justice system.

- Your support is needed to coordinate resources that support interventions to avoid repeated criminal justice system involvement. Needless incarceration of individuals with mental health and substance use disorders has become far too common. Expansion of problem-solving courts for non-violent offenders and the use of evidence-based decision-making is key to reducing incarceration.
- We ask the Mental Health Board to prioritize continuing the efforts of the MacArthur Safety and Justice Challenge. The MHTF supports funding for the behavioral health liaison at the Milwaukee County Jail; now funded by time limited grant funds. The position works with individuals who have a mental illness, serving as a liaison with community providers and BHD, to support continuity of care and ensure individuals are connected with services when they return to the community.

Supportive housing was also one of the most highly ranked priorities in the survey. Recovery is not possible without safe decent housing. Access to safe affordable housing continues to be an ongoing challenge for many BHD clients. The 2022 budget should continue to support collaboration with the Milwaukee County Housing Division, including support for Housing First, partnership with the Emergency Shelter Network, and training for case managers about housing services and client rights.

Addressing racial segregation and meeting the diverse needs of the citizens of the county centered on workforce development, recruitment, and retention. Frequent suggestions were made to improve efforts that include developing strategies to increase the number of clinicians that are representative of those they are treating.

- Workforce development resources are available in the American Rescue Plan Act for behavioral health workforce education and training. Section 2711 offers \$100 million for mental health and behavioral health education and training grants under section 756 of the PHS Act that the county may wish to gather more information on how to access targeted funds. The Health Resources & Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions manages those funds.

Lastly, the alarming number of fatal drug overdose deaths last year may warrant consideration for a new approach to SUD prevention and harm reduction. The Milwaukee County Medical Examiner report that drug-related deaths were the third-highest cause of death in 2020. Only natural causes and COVID-19 led to more deaths. And it was higher than homicides, suicides and motor vehicles deaths combined. Sadly, African Americans outpace all other groups in drug overdose deaths in

Milwaukee County. In 2020, 545 Milwaukee County residents lost their life to drug overdose, representing a 48 percent increase in drug overdose deaths compared to 2019. This may be the time to explore new models of community-based care and a different delivery system for Milwaukee County.

These models of care should treat the whole person by addressing social determinants of health in an integrated manner with mental health and substance use disorders. This will require expanding new partnerships with HMOs for healthcare coverage, health systems, primary care, housing, workforce development, and employment services. While the Mental Health Task Force understands that many of these services are outside the traditional realm of BHD services, offering the same array of services through expansion cannot achieve optimal health and economic outcomes for a healthy Milwaukee.

Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force members are ready and willing to be a resource to BHD. The MHTF is here to ensure that those in need of mental health and SUD services are treated with respect and dignity, and we stand dedicated to engaging consumers in services that are trauma informed and culturally competent.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony, and for your service on the Mental Health Board.