

May 30, 2023

The Honorable Joanne M. Comerford
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Higher Ed.

The Honorable David M. Rogers
House Chair, Joint Committee on Higher Ed.

Dear Chair Comerford, Chair Rogers, and Committee members,

The Children's League of Massachusetts (CLM) is a statewide non-profit association of 60 members, providers and advocates of child and family services across the Commonwealth. Together we promote the availability, accessibility, and quality of these needed services that promote the safety, health, and well-being of children and families. Our members know first-hand the struggles faced by vulnerable people and their providers in the Commonwealth, including due to the behavioral health workforce crisis.

We are writing today **in support of “an act establishing a behavioral health workforce center of excellence”** ([S.829](#) / [H.1275](#)). This behavioral health workforce center of excellence (The Center) is needed to gather data and research to advise policy leaders on how to address the behavioral health workforce crisis across the Commonwealth. Elements that stand out include studying the behavioral health workforce landscape, building career ladders, addressing training needs and how to leverage resources and funding, and examining ways to promote and increase diversity, equity and inclusion within the workforce. We also appreciate the input The Center and its advisory board will provide to the Department of Public Health on requirements that will affect the workforce and its pipeline. Expanding current recruitment and retention initiatives is crucial. By taking a long-term view of sustaining this critical workforce, the Center will be able to recommend strategies to meet the unmet mental health needs of children and adults in our state for many years to come.

The Need for Behavioral Health Services

As we know, there has been an uptick in children, youth, and adults struggling with depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders since the COVID-pandemic. The World Health Organization reported a 25% increase in anxiety and depression worldwide, at least in part due to the unprecedented stress caused by social isolation. Other reports have called attention to additional factors like negative impacts of social media and societal trends resulting in smaller families that are also more insulated from their communities. CLM recently [reported](#) on a rise in high-acuity youth with challenging behaviors and a lack of appropriate supports. We know the need for behavioral health services has dramatically increased throughout the pandemic.



The Workforce Crisis

At the same time, there is a workforce crisis, especially for behavioral health services, as these front-line, skilled jobs have become difficult, and at times almost impossible, to fill. Safety-net clinics surveyed by the Association for Behavioral Health (37 provider organizations providing outpatient mental health care at 124 locations) reported last year 640 vacancies among clinical staff and an average of 17 vacant positions each.¹ The number of vacancies has been disabling their capacity for patients. CLM's 2021 survey of providers showed a 73% capacity average among providers (included 31 programs over 94 sites), 64% maintaining a waitlist for services, 800 vacancies needing to be filled to reach pre-COVID staffing levels, and over the course of two years almost the same number of staff left programs as were hired. These vacancies and turnover hurt patients; as one respondent summarized, *"with a lack of permanent staff and reliance on relief or temporary staff, it is hard to maintain consistency and effective response."* High turnover and persistent vacancies also mean providers also spend more on temporary staff to fill gaps than would be spent on maintaining permanent hires – driving up costs. While the primary reason for exiting staff appears to be salary and benefits, creative enhancements for a diverse, skilled, workforce pipeline must be further developed by experts who will sit on The Center's Advisory board.

We urge the Committee to report this bill out favorably and secure its timely passage in order to bring long-term sustainability to the critical behavioral health workforce.

Sincerely,

Rachel Gwaltney
Executive Director
Children's League of Massachusetts

Supporting Members of the Children's League

18 Degrees
Bay State Community Services
Child & Family Services, Inc.
Heading Home Inc.
Helix Human Services

HopeWell
LUK, Inc.
NFI Massachusetts, Inc.
Wayside Youth & Family Support Network, Inc.

¹ Commonwealth Magazine, "124 Mental Health Clinics Report 640 Job Vacancies," Feb. 15, 2022, Association for Behavioral Healthcare (<https://www.abhmass.org/newsroom/abh-in-the-news/2379-february-15-2022-commonwealth-magazine-124-mental-health-clinics-report-640-job-vacancies.html>)