

Essential Medicaid Reform: Expanding Preventive Mental Health Services for Pennsylvania’s Children

The Crisis We Face: A System Designed to Wait

Suicide, despite being preventable, is a leading cause of death among children in Pennsylvania.¹ Tragically seven in ten youth in PA who die by suicide were never identified for prevention nor received mental health care. Yet, Pennsylvania’s Medicaid program does not pay for preventative mental health services for children, leaving thousands of children in Pennsylvania without critical mental health services that could save their lives or prevent the development of chronic mental health challenges.

Currently the state’s mental healthcare system is designed to wait until a child is suffering from mental health challenges, or has a diagnosis, to see a specialist. For example, depression and suicidality screenings in well-child visits start at age 12, which misses early prevention and is insufficient for a full mental health screening. Additionally, even if a child is screened for mental health issues, there is no standard intervention to prevent the progression to a disorder, nor is there a clear pathway for specialty care when seeking a diagnosis.

Comprehensive Mental Health: Expanding Mental Healthcare Across Tiers

	Physical Healthcare System	Mental Healthcare System
Tier 1	Pediatric well visits, i.e. well child visits, annual physical. with health education and universal screenings	Mental health education like mental health literacy or mental health first aid; universal screening for mental health, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and social determinants of health.
Tier 2	Pediatric sick visits with health interventions, targeted screening with referral to specialties for diagnosis (e.g. eyeglasses)	Targeted interventions for at-risk youth identified by screening for group and individual intervention; referral to mental health professional
Tier 3	Specialist visits, e.g. eye doctor or physical therapist	Behavioral consultation; outpatient individual, group, and family therapy; mobile therapy; development of individualized treatment plans

The state’s mental healthcare system should mirror the physical healthcare system’s model of prevention, connecting children to the specific care they need as early as possible. In the physical healthcare system, children get routine preventative screenings and interventions to prevent disease before it occurs, including standard pediatric interventions and referrals for specialty care to prevent the progression to disease. Just as in physical health, prevention and early engagement should be standard practices in mental healthcare for children.

A Smarter Path Forward

Pennsylvania must strengthen its child-focused mental health prevention efforts by ensuring access to support before problems escalate into crises and costly chronic conditions. Employing Medicaid to provide critical preventative services will ultimately reduce the need for intensive services and the economic burden of providing them. Universal mental health and targeted early engagement services are central to this approach.

Universal Mental Health Services

Screening all children in medical, community and school settings with American Academy of Pediatrics recommended mental health tools, materials, and activities that promote mental well-being for children.

Examples of Universal Mental Health Services	Potential Medicaid Codes	Mental Health Professional to Deliver Service
<p>Health Education, Promotion, and Skills Development Through mental health awareness education, life skills training, and service learning, teens increase resilience and wellbeing.</p> <p>These services supplement the education students receive in school and youth serving systems. Programs include evidence-based social emotional learning curriculums that help teens with identity formation and confidence building, addressing generational trauma, and developing a sense of belonging. They build skills in stress management, self-care planning, healthy relationships, problem solving, conflict resolution, goal setting, time management, and leadership and communication. Youth are given the opportunity to practice and apply these skills through service-learning projects and with coaching support.</p>	<p>H0025* for Behavioral health prevention education service (delivery of services with target population to affect knowledge, attitude and/or behavior)</p>	<p>Community Health Worker (CHW) Youth Peer Support Specialist (YPSS)</p>

Examples of Universal Mental Health Services	Potential Medicaid Codes	Mental Health Professional to Deliver Service
<p>Peer Support and Teen Leadership Community Based Organizations (CBOs) engage teen leaders to design programs, share prevention messages, and offer mentoring support to other teens. Teen leaders help their peers to develop coping strategies, avoid risk-taking behaviors, and seek counseling and additional mental health support when needed.</p> <p>Peer support represents a unique approach to fostering mutual relationships and health promotion, grounded in understanding and collaboration. It aims to develop skills and build resources that empower youth to lead their desired lives. Consistent evidence demonstrates that peer support leads to improved outcomes, empowerment, and a sense of hope.</p>	<p>H0025* for Behavioral health prevention education service (delivery of services with target population to affect knowledge, attitude and/or behavior)</p>	<p>Youth Peer Support Specialist</p>
<p>Mentoring and Career Pathways Development Teens are connected to trusted relationships with caring adults through mentorship, career coaching, and/or specialty programs. CBOs offer one-on-one mentoring, science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) education, internship programs, and career pathways development, including matching skills and interests with compatible careers. These programs connect to positive mental health. For example, a performance arts program can include education about communicating positive mental health messages and the impact of current events and media on mental health.</p>	<p>H0038 Peer Support (YPSS)</p> <p>H2032 Activity therapy</p>	<p>Youth Peer Support Specialist</p> <p>Community Health Worker</p>

**These services codes are in use in other states and need to be added to the Pennsylvania Medicaid State Plan.*

Targeted Early Engagement Services

Small group or individual programs for children presenting with indicators of mental health stress, or for their parents, through screenings for mental health, trauma, and adverse childhood experiences.

Examples of Targeted Early Engagement Services	Potential Medicaid Codes	Mental Health Professional to Deliver Service
<p>Early Intervention Services In addition to evidence based social emotional learning, CBOs provide safe spaces for developing skills for stress management, meditation, and self-care planning. They also offer trauma informed programs and services, art therapy, restorative practices, and grief and loss support. These services can serve as protective factors that provide teens will skills to cope with future stressors and provide opportunities to build interpersonal and communication skills.</p>	<p>H0038 Peer Support (YPSS)</p> <p>H0025* for Behavioral health prevention education service (delivery of services with target population to affect knowledge, attitude and/or behavior)</p> <p>T1027* for Family training and counseling for child development</p> <p>H0024* for Behavioral health prevention information dissemination service (one-way direct or non-direct contact with service audiences to affect knowledge and attitude)</p> <p>H2032 Activity therapy</p>	<p>Youth Peer Support Specialist Family Support Specialist (for young child)</p>
<p>Brief Intervention CBOs offer brief intervention and support for teens needing help navigating transitions, relationships, academic pressures, and early signs and symptoms of mental health needs.</p>	<p>H2027* Psychoeducational service</p> <p>H0038 Peer Support (YPSS)</p> <p>H0025* for Behavioral health prevention education service (delivery of services with target population to affect knowledge, attitude and/or behavior)</p> <p>T1027* for Family training and counseling for child development, H0046 for Mental health services, not otherwise specified</p>	<p>Youth Peer Support Specialist Family Support Specialist Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)</p>

Examples of Targeted Early Engagement Services	Potential Medicaid Codes	Mental Health Professional to Deliver Service
<p>Counseling Services Many CBOs provide on-site individual, group, and family therapy to teens. These counseling services are often accessible on a drop-in basis and are co-located with after-school programs. Increased access to counseling services in trusted community spaces helps reduce the stigma around mental health services. These services are often covered by the CBO and not reimbursed by an insurance provider; some CBOs do bill insurance including Medicaid.</p>	<p>T1027* for Family training and counseling for child development</p> <p>H0046 for Mental health services, not otherwise specified</p> <p>90846/90847 Family psychotherapy</p>	<p>Youth Peer Support Specialist</p> <p>BSW</p> <p>Master’s degree prepared clinician</p> <p>Master of Social Work (MSW)</p>
<p>Triage and Referral Connecting CBOs to health systems provides multiple entrance points to the system of care through community-based assessment and referrals, post-intervention support, and peer support. CBOs can help coordinate follow-up with healthcare services, promote family and teen engagement in care, and connect to crisis services when necessary.</p>	<p>H0038 Peer Support (YPSS)</p> <p>H0025* for Behavioral health prevention education service (delivery of services with target population to affect knowledge, attitude and/or behavior)</p> <p>G0023* Principal illness navigation services by certified or trained auxiliary personnel under the direction of a physician or other practitioner, including a patient navigator</p> <p>G0140* Principal illness navigation peer support provided by certified or trained auxiliary personnel under the direction of a physician or other practitioner, including a certified peer specialist</p>	<p>Youth Peer Support Specialist</p> <p>Community Health Worker</p> <p>Family Support Specialist</p> <p>BSW</p>

Examples of Targeted Early Engagement Services	Potential Medicaid Codes	Mental Health Professional to Deliver Service
<p>Care Management CBOs connect and educate teens and families about resources that address social determinants of health like food banks, housing, rent and utility assistance, transportation, and medical support. They also collaborate with primary care and behavioral health systems, schools, and juvenile justice to assist with health system navigation and engagement.</p>	<p>H2015* Comprehensive Community Support Services</p> <p>G0023* Principal illness navigation services by certified or trained auxiliary personnel under the direction of a physician or other practitioner, including a patient navigator</p> <p>G0140* Principal illness navigation peer support provided by certified or trained auxiliary personnel under the direction of a physician or other practitioner, including a certified peer specialist</p>	<p>Community Health Worker</p> <p>Youth Peer Support Specialist</p> <p>BSW</p>
<p>Violence Prevention and Response CBOs offer a safe place for youth, along with structured activities that build resilience. This programming helps intervene upstream and prevent violence. They also provide access to caring adults who are critical in preventing violence and trauma and in responding to community needs as they arise. CBOs achieve this by screening for Adverse Childhood Experiences, providing training in trauma-informed care and other youth-related needs, offering mental health first aid training, and promoting mandated reporting and best practices in child abuse prevention. They also engage in prevention programming, community outreach, and education and help families navigate the medical and legal system following victimization.</p>	<p>H0038 Peer Support</p> <p>H2015* Comprehensive Community Support Services</p>	<p>Youth Peer Support Specialist</p> <p>BSW</p>

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Children who received universal and targeted early engagement mental health services saw a 25% reduction in severe mental health issues later in life and improved academic performance and social relationships. They are better equipped to handle stress, develop stronger relationships with their family, stay engaged in school, and build a foundation for a brighter future. These services don't just prevent crises, they give children the tools to succeed, creating stronger, brighter futures.²

Recommendations for Reform

Pennsylvania's Medicaid program should clearly define and pay for universal mental health and targeted early engagement services for Medicaid-eligible children in early childhood education settings, schools, and community-based organizations. The proposed service definitions and service codes identified herein can be adopted and added to Pennsylvania's Medicaid State Plan to implement this recommendation.

Join the Movement

[Join Strong Minds, Bright Futures](#) to work with us to remove barriers so that families, schools, and communities can access the mental health resources they need—strengthening Pennsylvania's future through smart policies and strong partnerships.