

Behavioral Health Services

Trust
Alaska Mental Health
Trust Authority



Comprehensive services for people experiencing mental illness and addiction follow a continuum of care across the lifespan that prioritizes prevention, intervention, and community-based services — minimizing the need for expensive acute-level care and institutionalization.

Continuum of Care

- A functional continuum of care offers a consistent and integrated system delivering behavioral healthcare services to individuals — from prevention and screening, to brief intervention, to acute care, to peer supports, and to long-term health and recovery.
- The goal of a continuum of care is that all Alaskans have access to the right level of service, at the right place, at the right time.
- Receiving services in the least restrictive setting, as close to home as possible, leads to more meaningful lives for Alaskans, as well as cost efficiencies for state government.

Crisis Intervention

- Alaska's current response to individuals experiencing a behavioral health crisis typically involves law enforcement or paramedics.
- Efforts are underway to divert people experiencing mental illness and psychiatric crisis from the criminal justice system to appropriate services.
- Significant barriers exist due to lack of services and workforce support, access challenges, uncoordinated services, and gaps in the continuum.
- Some needs will be met as more services are reimbursed through the 1115 Behavioral Health Medicaid Waiver. Concurrently, it will be important to retain behavioral health grants for community behavioral health services to supplement what Medicaid doesn't cover.

Prevention: A Cost-Effective Approach

Community-based services are less expensive than residential or institutional care and can be equally, or more, effective. The need for mental health and addiction support continues to grow due to the COVID-19 emergency and providers are challenged to keep up.

Key Behavioral Health Issues:

Substance Misuse and Substance Use Disorders

- More Alaskans are reporting increased alcohol and other substance use as a way to cope, and the consequences are impacting families, friends, and communities.
- The misuse of substances can result in long-term negative health effects and is linked to a number of negative social, health, and environmental consequences.

Co-occurring Disorders: The Importance of an Integrated Approach

- Co-occurring disorders (also referred to as dual diagnosis) is a term used when someone experiences a mental illness and/or another disability and a substance use disorder simultaneously.
- Alaska's behavioral health system has made some progress toward integrating mental health and substance use services; however, work toward integration must continue.

Suicide Prevention

- Many Alaskan communities have no suicide prevention or intervention resources, placing responsibility on law enforcement, schools, hospital emergency rooms, tribal and state governments, and families.
- Health officials are concerned that suicide rates may increase as more Alaskans face unemployment, displaced housing, and increased stress related to the COVID-19 public health emergency.
- Suicide is the leading cause of death for Alaskans ages 15-24 years old. Focused prevention, treatment, and crisis services are needed to support the health and wellbeing of young Alaskans.



Compared to the same period in 2019, the Alaska Careline (suicide prevention hotline) received a 90% increase in calls from persons ages 24-44, and a 51% increase in new callers during Q3 of 2020.

Source: http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b2020_15.pdf

Unmet Need

Behavioral health treatment providers report that resources have not kept pace with the actual costs associated with serving the growing number of Alaskans who need their services. After decades of flat funding and grant reductions for mental health and addiction services, providers face:

- Aging infrastructure
- Workforce shortages
- Increased demand
- Inability to recruit and retain treatment professionals

Key Points

- Currently, Alaska's capacity to provide timely, appropriate levels of behavioral health support and to avoid institutional placement is limited.
- Crisis intervention currently relies on law enforcement and first responders, but recent promising efforts are underway to build a more appropriate system.
- Services that match an individual's level of need ultimately lead to more meaningful lives for all Alaskans, as well as cost efficiencies for state government.
- Understanding the importance of integrated mental health and addiction services and support network systems is critical when making policy and funding decisions.