

WE CHOOSE CARE

Next Steps for San Diego's Care Economy

A Call for Mental and Behavioral Health Care for Children and Youth (Ages 0-17)

What's keeping parents, caregivers, providers, and teachers up at night?

“We're wide-awake worrying about the mental and behavioral health of our children and youth.”

San Diego County is making a significant transition towards a “purple economy” or care economy. This shift recognizes care as a public good that benefits all of society and future generations. However, there are gaps in our system that demand urgent attention.

The recent approval of the **San Diego Child Care Blueprint** is a pivotal step forward in addressing the child care crisis and bolstering our local economy. Specifically, Strategy 3.5 emphasizes the need for **expanded collaboration** across County departments to understand referral pathways, availability of developmental screenings, services, and protective factors **for all children and youth**.

The **youth mental health crisis** in San Diego County has reached alarming proportions. According to the UCSD Behavioral Health Services Community Engagement Report, children and youth face significant challenges, including childhood abuse, substance misuse, and suicide ideation, with data from the **Community Experience Dashboard** indicating they are **significantly underserved**.



When families do access children's mental health services and support from schools, physicians, and community organizations it is often due to perseverance, privilege, and luck rather than a comprehensive system.¹

As children grow, their **brain plasticity and ability to change² behavior naturally decrease**. Without early intervention for developmental and behavioral concerns, these challenges can **grow more complex and costly** to address as they mature.³ That's why **we must act now**, with both urgency and compassion.



The Facts Tell Us...

Care. Can't. Wait.

The **2023 Behavioral Health Services Director's Report** acknowledges a transforming system, but **largely overlooks the needs of children and youth**. There is no specific mention of **0-5 or key prevention in early years**.



In San Diego County, **20% of the population is aged 0-17**, and **33% of all Medi-Cal eligible** community members are under 18, yet there is **very little transparent information** available on **spending for children and youth**.



Investment in the **Children's Behavioral Health System of Care in the County of San Diego** has decreased by **25% over the past 5 years**.⁵



Hospital emergency departments have reported an alarming increase in **youth psychiatric crises**. Rady Children's Hospital San Diego reported a **1,746% increase from 2011 to 2019**.⁶



Despite the growing need, **only 10,817 children and youth received services** through the County Behavioral Health Specialty Care System in FY 21-22, marking a **5% decrease from the previous year**.

California ranks 51 (out of 50 states and the DC area) for parents reporting **difficulty obtaining mental health care for their child**, indicating a significant shortfall in meeting **basic health equity principles**.⁸

Stories from the Community



Lizdey, a child facing significant behavioral challenges, found support through behavioral therapy at the Chicano Federation while her mother received guidance in parenting skills. Engaging in art activities with her peers serves as a creative outlet to nurture Lizdey's social-emotional growth.

- Parent Receiving Services with Chicano Federation



After the devastating loss of his father Angel felt confused and angry, leading to disruptive behavior at school. Through mental health consultation provided by the Chicano Federation, Angel and his mother found the validation and support needed to navigate their grief. With personalized one-on-one support at school, Angel had a safe and supportive environment to openly discuss and process his emotions about his father's passing, which has enabled him to better articulate his needs and emotions.

-Parent Receiving Services with Chicano Federation

"This program has impacted my life by creating what feels like a safe place for me to share and fully get to understand how everything [my] mind and life is going and I leave the sessions feeling lighter and more joyful from being able to just feel well heard."

- Young Person Receiving Mental Health Services with the YMCA





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Together, we are championing a five-step remedy for our County of San Diego systems to greater support child and youth mental and behavioral health.

Provide Data We Can Trust

The County Behavioral Health Services with the Department of Child and Family Well-Being should **collaborate to expand the UCSD Community Experience Dashboards**. This will ensure a system that accurately captures the services provided to and the projected needs of children and youth. With accurate data projection and collection in place, the County of San Diego can **design a Continuum of Care with clear, measurable goals** similar in structure to the County's Adult Continuum of Care.

Build a Workforce That Supports Children and Youth

Integrate strategies **tailored to the needs of the child and youth populations** in behavioral health workforce development discussions. Any investment in the behavioral health workforce should reflect the specific needs of children and youth compared to the adult system.

Protect What We Have

Acknowledging state budget deficits, **we ask the County to protect children and youth behavioral health services funding in Fiscal Year (FY) 24-25 budget** (similar to FY 22-23 levels) to maintain access for children that are currently engaging in services, with an emphasis to allow for efficiencies and collaboration with these resources.

Give Children and Youth A Fair Share

If the County's general fund investment and/or other flexible funding sources for behavioral health services increase in the FY 24-25 budget, we recommend **prioritizing programs with the highest demand to address waiting lists**. At the very least, ensure that a proportional amount of the overall FY 24-25 behavioral health services budget is allocated to children and youth services.

Make No Decisions For Youth and Families, Without Hearing From Youth and Families

Representation of youth and families in decision-making processes is essential. To achieve this, we recommend **elevating the youth and family voice in San Diego's community commissions and boards** related to Behavioral Health Services. This includes allocating at least two seats for parents/caregivers and youth on the Behavioral Health Advisory Board and incorporating regular updates and discussions about children and youth during public meetings.

Sources

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