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New Study Identifies Barriers to Outpatient Mental Health Services in Massachusetts

Researchers Used Varied Approach to Collect Data on Wait Times from Patients, Providers, Administrators and Stakeholders

BOSTON (Oct. 31, 2017) – The [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation](#) today released the results of a comprehensive research project that sheds new light on barriers to getting access to outpatient mental health services in Massachusetts.

The study, commissioned by the Foundation and led by the Cambridge-based research firm Abt Associates, involved a mixed-methods approach that collected qualitative data from stakeholder interviews and client focus groups along with quantitative data from surveys of clinicians and administrators at organizations providing outpatient mental health services. More specifically, the research was conducted between July 2016 and March 2017 and included 21 stakeholder interviews, four focus groups, and survey responses from a representative sample of 413 licensed mental health providers in Massachusetts, and 85 organization administrators.

In Massachusetts, mental health conditions affect more than 1 million people, and nearly half of adults with mental illness do not receive treatment in a given year, according to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The findings of the Foundation study demonstrate the need to identify programs, policies and resources that improve access to outpatient mental health services and that help individuals find a provider when they need one.

“While we all have – or have heard – stories of the often long and challenging process of getting outpatient mental health treatment, this study provides formal data to validate those experiences,” said Audrey Shelto, President of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation. “As a community, we must continue to develop new ways to make mental health care more accessible. We should not accept the status quo as inevitable.”

Key findings from the study include the following:



- Individuals and stakeholders describe the process of connecting with an outpatient mental health provider as complicated and onerous; clients experienced long wait times from the point at which they identified a need for outpatient services.
- The wait time for a psychiatrist is particularly long relative to other types of licensed mental health clinicians.
- The wait time for an outpatient mental health appointment for a child is generally longer than that of an adult, and this difference is likely exacerbated when seeking a psychiatrist specifically.
- Those with public insurance such as MassHealth may experience longer wait times than those with commercial insurance or those able to self-pay for services.
- Outpatient mental health providers, particularly psychiatrists, are opting out of the insurance system, which diminishes the number of providers available to those who are unable to pay without insurance.
- Providers and organization administrators reported that providers have diverse specialty training; however, individuals, parents and stakeholders reported that it is challenging to make a timely connection to a provider who fits individual client needs.

“Anyone familiar with mental health treatment knows that we have access issues both in Massachusetts and nationally,” said Philip Johnston, Chairman of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation. “Now we have a very detailed look at exactly what those challenges are, and the hope is that with this information policy makers can begin to devise solutions.”

The study, released through a series of reports titled “Access to Outpatient Mental Health Services in Massachusetts,” is available online via the following link:

<https://bluecrossmafoundation.org/publication/access-outpatient-mental-health-services-massachusetts>.

About the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation

The mission of the [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation](https://bluecrossmafoundation.org) is to expand access to health care for low-income and vulnerable individuals and families in the Commonwealth. The Foundation was founded in 2001 with an initial endowment from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts. It operates separately from the company and is governed by its own Board of Directors.

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