

Oregon's behavioral health system is in crisis

CareOregon is taking action to help stabilize the system and improve patient experience

The events of 2020 amplified existing health disparities and brought to light challenges some communities face in accessing health services. Oregon's community mental health and substance use treatment system was especially hard hit by the dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and unprecedented wildfires that displaced thousands.

A convergence of factors has resulted in:

► Provider turnover:

- Turnover in community mental health settings skyrocketed from an average of 20-25% per year to 45% in 2020-21.
- Many skilled staff are leaving the profession, not just their positions, making it even more challenging for behavioral health agencies to find suitable replacements.

► Unprecedented caseloads, compounded by low pay for providers, leading to staff turnover:

- Due to vacancies, clinicians have caseloads of 90-100 clients, making it challenging to deliver the number of services individuals need.
- Providers in community health settings make less than they could working in jobs that require less training.

► Long wait times for people with mental health needs:

- Waitlists for outpatient mental health services have ballooned from approximately two weeks pre-2020 to an average of two months for youth and up to six months for adults seeking outpatient care.
- Some community Intensive Case Management programs have stopped accepting referrals because of the length of their waitlists—making it difficult to successfully transition clients from inpatient settings back into the community.
- The State Hospital has significantly restricted access to hospital beds, shifting patient care to local services. In 2019, the State Hospital accepted 200 civilly committed patients. In 2020, they accepted only 20 from across the state.

To address these challenges, we are making strategic investments to stabilize, support and improve regional behavioral health services.

CareOregon is taking immediate steps to help stabilize the behavioral health network, including:

Making a one-time \$7.5 million cash infusion to support providers serving high acuity patients

- The CareOregon Emergency Behavioral Health Workforce Stabilization Fund will provide funding to approximately 25 behavioral health provider agencies—aiming to use funds as direct financial support to help recruit and retain qualified staff.
- Selected agencies serve approximately 85% of our highest acuity patients and are experiencing the highest year-over-year turnover of staff.

And working on longer term solutions that will result in tangible improvements for behavioral health providers and patients, such as:

Working with provider agencies to address wage, workload and workforce pipeline issues

► Administrative barriers:

- Working with provider agencies to find opportunities to reduce administrative burdens, so they can focus on patient care.
- Created a joint workforce committee with our provider network to examine administrative barriers at both the health plan and state level.

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► **Payment models:**

- Engaging culturally specific behavioral health providers in conversations about how to co-design a payment and operating model that sustains and supports these providers to best serve our community.
- Supporting our providers' efforts to increase capacity and exploring models that could improve payment parity across diverse providers.
- Completing various rate analyses to support longer term stability of behavioral health agencies.

► **Workforce pipeline:**

- CareOregon Workforce Team launching to explore and implement variety of strategies to increase provider capacity (expanded telehealth options, etc.).
- Working with higher education to improve the workforce pipeline.

And ensuring that provider, member and community voice is part of conversations about behavioral health systems improvement in the regions we serve:

- Convening regional conversations about how to support our neighbors experiencing behavioral health emergencies (Portland Metro, Jackson County).
- Advocating on behalf of providers in conversations with State and elected bodies, including advocating that the statewide Behavioral Health Quality Improvement Project focus on workforce.
- Participating in a special session of Health Share's Behavioral Health Advisory Council on Access to support prioritization decisions for existing resources.

What behavioral health provider agencies are saying about this approach:

Funding from CareOregon gave our team the opportunity to create an investment plan focused on recruiting qualified professionals and positioning our organization as their employer of choice. We think this investment will pay dividends in the quality of care we are able to provide children and families for years to come.

– **Columbia County Mental Health, Todd Jacobson, Executive Director**

Since CareOregon took on the management of all the behavioral health contracts within Health Share of Oregon, CareOregon and the Alliance for Culturally Specific Behavioral Health Providers has had a very collaborative relationship. CareOregon is committed to the values and needs of the communities that Alliance members serve. It has invested in sustaining and increasing the capacity of Alliance members to serve the diverse communities and retain culturally specific workforce. CareOregon and the Alliance have engaged in a co-design project of future culturally specific care and payment models. We feel that the voices of our communities are being included and valued.

– **The Alliance for Culturally Specific Behavioral Health Providers**

Like many behavioral health providers, OnTrack Rogue Valley is experiencing a significant staffing shortage. Our community is experiencing an ever-greater need for our services, but until we can become fully staffed, we are limited in how many clients we can serve. With the help of Jackson Care Connect's workforce support funding, we will attract more applicants to our open positions and also reward our hard-working staff who have helped us keep our doors open throughout the pandemic.

– **OnTrack Rogue Valley, Sommer Wolcott, Executive Director**

The uncertainty of the times has fueled an increase in kids struggling with their mental well-being. However, due to a dearth of qualified child and family therapists, we are experiencing significant difficulties in meeting the growing need for mental health care. Thanks to the generous support from CareOregon and others in our community, Kerr is creating a Recruitment and Retention Fund that will attract, develop and retain qualified child and family therapists.

– **Albertina Kerr, Jeff Carr, CEO**