

Gov. Pritzker Announces Recommendations From Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative

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CHICAGO — Today Governor JB Pritzker joined local, state, and community leaders to release a [new report](#) from the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative, which will redesign the delivery of behavioral health services for Illinois youth. The

goal of the Initiative is to transform statewide systems to provide clear, consistent, and comprehensive guidance to families seeking behavioral or mental health services for children and adolescents.

“Nearly a year ago, I announced the Children’s Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative, which builds on the substantial progress made by Illinois agencies to ensure that every young person experiencing mental or behavioral health problems can access needed services,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “Through rate increases, community networks, and inter-agency collaboration, we are taking a multi-faceted, comprehensive approach to establish the number one children’s behavioral healthcare system in the nation.”

“In Illinois, we put children first by developing policies and partnerships that see each child, support every family, and provide resources all across the state,” said Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton. “This blueprint for transformation is an innovative, collaborative approach that will positively impact our most vulnerable youth in all areas of behavioral health. Addressing challenges that impact the wellbeing of our children, and providing them with information and services that help, will strengthen our communities for generations to come.”

The Transformation Initiative, launched in March 2022 by Governor Pritzker in response to a nationwide youth mental health crisis, evaluated the existing landscape for behavioral and mental health services across the state, and outlined strategies and recommendations to better serve Illinois’ youth and families. To develop recommendations, the Initiative engaged hundreds of stakeholders, analyzed dozens of statutes and policies, analyzed administrative data, and researched best practices from states and counties across the country.

Data were analyzed by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago under the leadership of Dr. Dana Weiner and in collaboration with the Illinois Departments of Human Services (DHS), Healthcare and Family Services (HFS), Children and Family Services (DCFS), Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Public Health (DPH), and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to develop a set of streamlined, accessible, and responsive solutions for families.

The Initiative represents a collaborative, multi-agency effort and delivers evidence-driven solutions to accomplish five goals: adjusting capacity to ensure the right resources are available to youth in need, streamlining processes to make it easier for youth and families to access services, intervening earlier to prevent crises from developing, increasing accountability to ensure we have a transparent system, and developing agility so that the system can adjust to meet the evolving needs of youth.

The Initiative builds on the strengths of Illinois' behavioral health system. By taking an interagency, data-driven, comprehensive approach, the Pritzker administration is creating an Illinois where every child and family can thrive.

“With unprecedented collaboration from the child-serving state agencies, provider partners, and stakeholders across Illinois, we have developed a Blueprint that can unify us and guide our efforts to improve the children's behavioral health service system,” said Dana Weiner, PhD. Director of the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative. “Together, we can work toward a future where all kids have access to the services they need to be healthy, happy, and strong.”

“Chapin Hall brings research and decades of policy expertise to every challenge. Interest has never been higher in changing policy to ensure equal outcomes for all children,” said Chapin Hall Executive Director Bryan Samuels. “We are proud to work alongside Governor Pritzker's office to implement new evidence-based policies that can create a very different world – one where systems support and protect families as they navigate difficult social and economic conditions and seek the best for their children.”

To accomplish its five goals, the Blueprint presents 12 recommendations—including creating a centralized resource for families seeking services for children, increasing capacity to serve more children and families, and building the workforce using direct support paraprofessionals and supporting other roles with incentives and creative approaches to credentialing.

“Across state agencies, we are working together to build a strong and solid foundation for young people in Illinois,” said Grace Hou, Secretary, Illinois Department of Human Services. “This important work will transform the children's behavioral health service system to increase and improve access and to provide clear, consistent, and comprehensive guidance to families seeking behavioral and mental health services for children and youth in their care.”

“Investment in our state's youth through a holistic, whole-child approach provides them with the key resources and support they need to succeed,” said Senate Majority Leader Kimberly A. Lightford (D-Maywood). “We are taking a positive step toward ensuring families of children who struggle with severe behavior health needs are uplifted and have access to the high-quality care they deserve.”

“The value of the blueprint announced by the Governor with the Children's Behavioral Health Officer cannot be overstated,” said State Senator Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago).

“This work has the promise of being the most transformative accomplishment for children in the history of our state. If done correctly, it will organically connect with the Governor’s bold early childhood education Smart Start Illinois plan.”

“Families with children who need mental health services can often feel like they are entering a complex maze when trying to find the best care for their children,” said State Senator Karina Villa (D- West Chicago). “This transformation blueprint will provide families the map they need to navigate the systems available to them.”

"Illinois has struggled for far too long with maintaining a well-resourced children's behavioral health system, including both residential beds and the stable workforce necessary to provide care," said State Rep. Lindsey LaPointe (D-Chicago). "No family should have to send their child out of state in a time of acute crisis. This plan will provide our kids and families with what they need right here in Illinois"

“Our state’s most vulnerable youth deserve wraparound support that puts them on a path to a better tomorrow,” said State Senator Elgie R. Sims, Jr. (D-Chicago). “Today we have built upon our strong foundation to put forth a coordinated strategy that will allow us to better uplift families with children who have severe behavioral health needs.”

The public children’s behavioral health system in Illinois includes the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services (HFS), the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and the Illinois Department of Public Health (DPH).

“HFS is committed to ensuring that Illinois Medicaid helps families succeed. You can see this commitment through our efforts to increase payments to providers, introduce new services, and re-think parts of Medicaid,” HFS Director Theresa Eagleson said. “We are committed to working with our sister agencies to advance the Transformation Initiative and to continue to expand capacity and broaden access to high-quality behavioral health services to improve outcomes for children and their families, and ultimately, to improve lives.”

“Ensuring the children we care for are not only safe, but thriving, is a tremendous responsibility. The launch of the Transformation Initiative sets in motion immediate and meaningful action to transform how Illinois serves the youth and families who need us most,” said DCFS Director Marc E. Smith. “We are radically changing the way we collectively address behavioral health services in Illinois and will, along with other benefits, providing equitable and easy access to care for every family that needs it.”

“As the Director of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice and a parent, I am grateful to Governor Pritzker for taking action to address the unprecedented behavioral health crisis our children face here in Illinois and around the country, especially in the wake of COVID-19,” said Heidi Mueller, Director at Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. “After more than a year of intensive multi-agency collaboration, Dr. Weiner has produced a blueprint for transformation that includes innovative yet practical solutions to make sure Illinois children and their families have access to the behavioral health care they need, and aligns closely with the goals of IDJJ’s own 21st Century Transformation plan. We at IDJJ are excited to be part of the Children’s Behavioral Health Transformation team and are eager to do our part to make the blueprint recommendations a reality for Illinois kids and families.”

“Any student in need of behavioral health treatment deserves access to quality care, and it is essential that parents, educators, and school districts know how to help them receive that care. The Transformation Initiative will serve as both map and key for connecting this vulnerable group of students to critical resources,” said State Superintendent of Education Dr. Tony Sanders. “ISBE is proud to join interagency efforts to put this visionary program into action and looks forward to improving service and coordination for youth across Illinois.”

“As a pediatrician, I have seen firsthand the unprecedented behavioral health challenges our children are facing,” said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra. “The Children’s Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative addresses these challenges head on with a bold, multi-agency effort to redesign how we deliver services to children and families in Illinois. I applaud Governor Pritzker for prioritizing the issue of children’s behavioral health, and IDPH is committed to partnering across government to deliver solutions. This focus on the health of our children is critical to building the brightest futures for all our communities.”

Governor Pritzker’s administration launched several initiatives over the past few years to improve healthcare access for children and families across the state. Last November, the IDPH-led Illinois Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Expansion was rolled out. The federally funded program is designed to help pediatricians and other providers meet children’s mental health needs by strengthening mental health services in hospital emergency departments and schools. The effort is a partnership involving IDPH, HFS and DHS plus the University of Illinois Chicago’s DocAssist Program and the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (ICAAP).

In December 2022, HFS began to introduce the [Pathways to Success](#) initiative across Illinois. Pathways to Success will help children with complex mental health conditions, and their families, navigate the children’s mental health system. Additionally, Pathways

allows HFS to introduce new services and supports such as intensive in-home services, family peer support, individual and therapeutic supports, and respite for children. These new Pathways services have shown success in other states helping children remain safe, at home, and in their communities. HFS' increased investment in traditional behavioral health services and continued efforts to introduce new elements of the Pathways to Success initiative will provide the Transformation Initiative a strong foundation to build upon.

The Pritzker administration has also worked to build out a full continuum of care for youth with investments in the FY24 budget. A total of \$10 million is being invested in a two-year expansion of Comprehensive Community Based Youth Services for youth aged 11 to 17 who are at risk of involvement in the child welfare system or the juvenile justice system. This funding will better equip these organizations to provide 24/7 services to youth — including assessments, crisis stabilization, and housing — while assisting the critical work of DCFS staff. This \$10 million is part of a total of \$22.8 million that the budget dedicates to jump start the recommendations in the Blueprint.

A plan for accomplishing the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative recommendations will be submitted to the Governor in October 2023 to guide ongoing work.

For more information and to view the report, click [here](#).