

Gov. Pritzker Announces Statewide Initiative With Google Public Sector To Improve Access To Children's Behavioral Healthcare Resources

January 30 2024 8:47 AM



CHICAGO — Governor JB Pritzker joined the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) and Google Public Sector on Monday to announce the creation of BEACON (Behavioral Health Care and Ongoing Navigation): A Service Access Portal for Illinois

Youth. Powered by Google Cloud's secure, scalable, and advanced artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud computing technology, the new state-of-the-art online portal will provide a user-friendly experience for Illinois families to access behavioral and mental health resources for children. The Division of Mental Health (DMH) at DHS is collaborating with Google Public Sector to deliver this ongoing statewide transformation.

"We are doing away with decentralized, difficult-to-navigate behavioral health resources scattered across different agencies, providers, and websites," said Governor JB Pritzker. "Instead, families will have a modern, easy to use online system to guide them through the behavioral health universe. This is another example of Illinois is leading the way — to mobilize public-private partnerships and couple ingenuity with empathy."

"We know that early exposure to trauma follows a child into adulthood. Early intervention is critical when healing mental health struggles, which is why the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative is so important," said Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton. "With Google's help, the new portal will centralize and simplify the process of securing vital support for families across Illinois."

On February 15, 2023, the Pritzker Administration published this groundbreaking transformation plan, entitled "Blueprint for Transformation: A Vision for Improved Behavioral Healthcare for Illinois Children." A team of experts, led by Dr. Dana Weiner, Director of the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative, will work closely with various Illinois agencies to create a comprehensive approach to expanding resource availability.

"In Illinois, we are committed to thinking outside the box – if a solution doesn't exist already, we build one – which is exactly what we're doing here today," said Dr. Dana Weiner, Chief Officer for Children's Behavioral Health Transformation. "I'm thrilled to share in the Governor's announcement of this historic partnership with Google, which has already begun to offer creative and sensitive insights for developing more efficient and productive solutions for families. I appreciate all of the support and collaboration that has contributed to our incredible progress over the last year toward transforming the children's behavioral health service system in Illinois, and I'm hopeful about what the future holds."

"Given the rising mental health crisis in the United States, access to behavioral health services for children is critical to their overall health, safety, and wellbeing," said Chris Hein, Director of Customer Engineering, Google Public Sector. "Google Public Sector is proud to collaborate with the state of Illinois to launch BEACON, a centralized resource hub powered by human-centered AI. Our team designed this system by working backwards from the needs of families to create a seamless experience that will help reduce barriers to care. Google Public Sector is committed to using technology for

positive societal impact, and this initiative exemplifies our dedication to creating a more accessible and equitable future for all. We applaud Governor Pritzker's leadership in addressing this important issue.”

The centralized point of access will improve the experience of families engaged with the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Healthcare and Family Services (HFS), the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), the Department of Public Health (DPH), and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). This distinct support service will eliminate any further frustration for parents and caretakers who are already challenged by their child’s distress.

The development of the BEACON portal moves the State closer to accomplishing the five goals recommended by the Children’s Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative:

1. Streamlining processes to make it easier for youth and families to access services,
2. Adjusting capacity to ensure the right resources are available to youth in need,
3. Intervening earlier to prevent crises from developing,
4. Increasing accountability to ensure the State has a transparent system, and
5. Developing agility so that the system can adjust to meet the evolving needs of youth.

“It is incredibly important to continue to reduce barriers to behavioral and mental health care for all families and children in Illinois”, said Dulce M. Quintero, IDHS Secretary Designate. “This administration continues to use new technology to provide important resources to families in more accessible and user-friendly ways. We at IDHS are excited to partner with Google Public Sector on this new state-of-the-art care portal.”

“The new online care portal is an innovative example of using the latest technology to improve the public health of Illinois’s residents,” said DPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra. “Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, Illinois continues to prioritize the mental and behavioral health of children and families. This health equity initiative will reduce barriers to care and provide children and families easier access to the services they need.”

“We started the Children’s Behavioral Healthcare Transformation Initiative because we need a system that makes it easier for families to be able to access quality behavioral health care for their children,” said HFS Director Elizabeth M. Whitehorn. “This new portal is a giant step forward to simplify the process for families by giving them one entry point to seek services through the State. I look forward to continuing to work with the Governor’s Office and our sister agencies to find more innovative solutions like this that will improve lives across Illinois.”

“Helping justice-impacted youth and families connect to vital behavioral and mental health services is crucial to the rehabilitation of the population that we serve at DJJ,” said IDJJ Director Heidi Mueller. “The care portal will be an invaluable tool in helping families more quickly and easily access the resources they need to address their children’s behavioral health needs, and it will reduce the burden on families to navigate complex systems of care just to get their children the help they need. I’m excited and hopeful about the innovation and collaboration that has led to the creation of this tool and look forward to continuing to collaborate with our sister agencies and Dr. Weiner’s team to implement the Blueprint for Transformation.”

“Illinois continues to prioritize the needs of children and establish itself as a groundbreaking leader in behavioral healthcare,” said DCFS Director Marc D. Smith. “By providing interventions and services to children early in their lives, the results will be exponentially positive to all of our agencies in the very near future.”

“Access and equity in all forms of health care is a top priority of mine,” said State Senator Mike Simmons (D-Chicago). “I am happy to see our state taking intentional steps across a wide range of partners, to transform mental and behavioral health care in Illinois for young people. Our young people and their families deserve to have the support they need, and the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative is a major accomplishment that will help change lives for the better.”

“Every family throughout Illinois must have access to an effective behavioral health system that can meet their specific needs and the needs of their children,” said State Senator Laura Fine (D-Glenview). “This initiative reflects the foundation Illinois has built towards a dependable system that connects children to appropriate mental health support and care during this critical time.”

"Here in Illinois, we have raised the bar on our commitment to youth in need of a range of behavioral health supports — from an initial phone call and peer support to acute residential crisis care," said State Representative Lindsey LaPointe (D-Chicago). "We have a long way to go on this difficult and long-term work, but I'm proud to live in a state where policymakers believe that healthcare is a human right and mental health care is healthcare."

“Today’s news that Google is joining the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative to build the care portal should give parents great optimism,” said State Senator Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago). “For families who have struggled to navigate a complex system in search of a trusted provider, this partnership with Google will streamline their path to care.”