

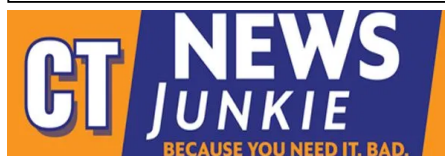
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Health Care

# Coalition Calls For Greater Access To Mental Health Services

by **Lisa Backus**

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After a spike in adults and children seeking mental health treatment during the pandemic, a “Recovery For All” coalition of lawmakers, union leaders and providers are calling on Gov. Ned Lamont and legislative leaders to increase funding and access to services.

The state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and the state Department of Children and Families are in a staffing crisis that has impacted the agencies’ ability to provide mental health services to the state’s poorest residents, according to the coalition.

“The stress is compounding, not only for adults, but for children,” Emily McEvoy, a New Britain Racial Justice Coalition board member and a Middletown Local Interagency Service Team Coordinator, said. “Trauma

that existed before is being compounded during the pandemic. There are fights occurring at home, which is sad.”

McEvoy was joined by other stakeholders in the healthcare system including the New England Health Care Employees Union, SIEU 1199, DMHAS and DCF employees, lawmakers and child and disability rights advocates in calling for more money and more services.

The group is seeking a “dramatic” increase in funding for DHMAS and an expansion of programs aimed at children, young adults and adults through community and private providers to address mental health needs in the state.

In order to increase services, the state needs to pay competitive wages to recruit and retain psychiatrists and other mental health workers, said Deborah Dorfman, executive director of Disability Rights Connecticut. “We have to entice providers to be in Connecticut and work in Connecticut, otherwise we won’t be able to do what we need to do,” she said.

The coalition will provide funding figures to Gov. Ned Lamont later this month, organizers said. The group estimated that there are about 750 current vacancies at DHMAS that need to be filled and another 500 employees will be eligible to retire soon. Another 100 DHMAS employees would need to be hired to reopen closed addiction services units, the group said.

DCF has 60 vacancies and 100 employees eligible to retire, the coalition said. In order to reopen the closed psychiatric units in Middletown, DCF needs an additional 90 employees.

The state needs to make sure that children who have behavioral health issues have access to services, because at this point they don’t, Dorfman said. “At the core is that we really need to fix provider rates and make sure the services are there,” she said.

Nationally, the pandemic which began in March of 2020, has driven up the number of people who have unmet mental health needs in certain groups including those who experienced a job loss, essential workers and those without a college education, according to a congressional research report.

In Connecticut that has translated into a 20% increase in calls to 211 from people seeking mental health treatment and more trips to the emergency department for children and adults who are in a mental health crisis, the coalition said. During the pandemic, about 30% of adults in Connecticut suffering with anxiety and depression have not had their treatment needs met, according to a Kaiser Foundation survey.

At the same time, the coalition said, budget cuts to DHMAS and DCF throughout the years are hamstringing the agencies from providing mental health services that are greatly needed.

The expanded services should extend to criminal justice reforms that end solitary confinement, ensuring that everyone leaving prison has a state identification card so that people can access jobs and mental health services and medical and mental health prison discharge plans, the group said.

Other proposals include the collection of data on race, ethnicity and language for those who are forced into psychiatric treatment in order to determine if disparities exist and how to remedy them.

In order to better serve children, the group wants more state-run or funded mental health services that include mobile crisis services and an expansion of school-based health services. The goal should be one social worker for every 250 students and there should be social workers, school psychologists and school counselors in every school, the proposed plan said.

To help adults dealing with mental health issues, the group wants expanded recovery supports, the reestablishment of lead mental health

agencies, advocacy for adults and seniors and an expansion of young adult services.

The legislature is ready to act with funding and expanded programs when the General Assembly goes into session in February, House Speaker Matt Ritter, D-Hartford, said.

“This is an opportunity to do something historic and in a bipartisan way with overwhelming support,” Ritter said. “We need to put more money into the public sector and the private sector. We need to expand telehealth so that people have access to services in their own homes, where they want them. But we have to be honest, we need to offer incentives for people to move to Connecticut. If everyone is united, we can do something historic.”

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