

Youth BH navigator case study



How the Washington State Health Care Authority is excelling in addressing the children and youth behavioral health crisis

As Washington State's largest purchaser of health services, the Health Care Authority (HCA) supports the whole-health needs of more than 2.7 million individuals. It has a strong commitment to behavioral health and provides state-funded (Medicaid) services for substance use treatment, mental health, and problem gambling.

The challenge

Due to youth mental health escalating into a national crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington Governor Jay Inslee declared a statewide youth mental health crisis in March 2021.¹ He directed the HCA to immediately begin work on supporting the behavioral health needs of children and youth, and to address the full spectrum of rising pediatric behavioral health needs.¹

Emergency departments (EDs) have been increasingly serving as youth mental health crisis units, with a 60% increase in average length of stay — a practice commonly referred to as "emergency room boarding."¹ In Washington, the rate of admittance for pediatric suicide attempts increased over 40% between 2018 and 2021.²

Washington youth also experience mental illness at a rate higher than the national average. 20% of Washington State adolescents 12-17 have experienced a major depressive episode in any given year, compared to 16% nationally.³ In 2021, 12.5% of children ages 3-17 in Washington received mental health care in the past year, compared to 11.2% of children in the U.S.³

HCA leadership knew it needed to invest in new partnerships that would address this emergency by providing preventative and effective behavioral health care to high-risk youth and their families.

"We act as a middleperson and recommend resources," says Charity Joy, Youth Outreach Care Specialist Lead, Carelon Behavioral Health. "We are a hope bridge."

85%

Youth optimistic for their future after having participated in the program

“We handle communication barriers,” says Taylor Peterson, Youth Outreach Care Specialist Lead, Carelon Behavioral Health. “We are liaisons: the glue that helps stick things together.”

100%

Youth and families satisfied with the impact of the program

The solution

HCA selected Carelon Behavioral Health as its partner due to Carelon’s strong reputation for providing community-based support for youth. After accepting the contract, Carelon quickly activated a tailored program in Southwest Washington to address the community’s unique needs — the Youth Behavioral Health Navigator program. This program facilitates specialized care coordination services for complex and high-risk youth.

The Youth Behavioral Health Navigator aims to connect youth and their families with the resources they need to reduce repeat visits, also known as recidivism. The program specifically targets emergency room utilization and youth involved with law enforcement and works to prevent these incidents from happening in the first place. When a youth enters the program, a multidisciplinary team (MDT) rapidly convenes to put together a support plan and identify resources. Looking to engage a wide range of partners, the program invites managed care organizations (MCOs), the child’s school, and anyone else who can offer support on behalf of the child to their meetings.

“When you serve the most high-risk youth, success is different. Change comes slowly. Years of trauma and chaos need to be worked through in baby steps. Simply improving a family’s plan of action is a step in the right direction. For example, if a youth lands back in the ED but the family has a plan and the resources available to help them out of that situation more quickly than the previous time, that’s success,” says Brook Vejo, Program Manager, Carelon Behavioral Health.

The result

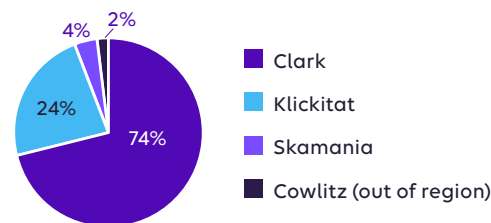
The MDTs have proven effective in bringing families and support resources together to develop ongoing care plans for youth.

Youth and families attend most MDT sessions, continuing to provide valuable input before, during, and after sessions.

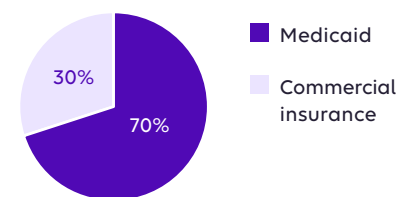
“Carelon’s Youth Navigator program in Southwest Washington has already had several successful outcomes,” says Ruth Leonard, MA, SUDP, Section Supervisor, Strategic Design and Program Oversight, Washington State Health Care Authority. “The program’s team of dedicated individuals are passionate about assisting youth and families experiencing different levels of distress. Carelon demonstrates an intervention model that keeps youth and families out of emergency departments, with life-changing results.”

Metrics are from March–October 2023.

Referrals by county



Referrals by insurance



Between March–October 2023, the Southwest Community Multidisciplinary Team spent an average of 90 days per youth and family to support behavioral health needs and offer resources.

Sources:

1 https://governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/proc_21-05.1.pdf

2 National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information website: *Experiences of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Patients Boarding in the Emergency Department from Staff Perspectives. Patient Journey Mapping* (accessed May 2023); [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36111111/).

3 <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/mental-health/33-days-without-sunlight-why-hundreds-of-washington-kids-in-mental-health-crisis-are-living-inside-windowless-emergency-departments/>