Overview of the Behavioral Health System in the United States

Access to Mental Health Services · https://bridges4mentalhealth.org/hub/access-to-mental-health-services/overview-of-the-behavioral-health-system-in-the-united-states/

This resource provides a helpful summary of how behavioral health services are offered in the US and could be used to help child welfare professionals better understand the services available to children and families. It can also be helpful for families navigating systems in an attempt to get their needs met.

Behavioral Health System Overview

National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services

Building Bridges to Improve Mental Health

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The behavioral health (BH) service system in the United States is complex. It comprises multiple funders, provider types, and organizational and leadership structures at the federal, state, county, and local levels[1]. Public and/or private organizations and practitioners can offer behavioral health services. This complexity and the lack of a central or uniform leadership structure across states creates challenges to implementing performance improvements across a broad spectrum of providers. However, despite these barriers, a significant impact can be made by clearly understanding how each state, county, or region's behavioral system is organized and with adequate motivation, leadership, and collaboration among key departments. Identifying the key players and obtaining buy-in and support are keys to success in behavioral health system change efforts.

Funding and Administration

Funding and administration of behavioral health services are divided across Federal, State, county, local, and private sources. The main funding sources for services for children involved with child welfare are Medicaid and CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program). Federal agencies also help pass legislation and establish regulations that can significantly impact once enacted2. At the State level, there is typically a behavioral health authority that utilizes State and Federal block grant funds to administer services for mental health and substance use disorders. Although the bulk of funding is provided by Medicaid and the children's mental health authorities, other contributors include agencies responsible for early childhood, child welfare, school systems, intellectual and developmental disabilities, public health, etc. For example, child welfare departments may hire behavioral health professionals to provide services directly to youth involved in the system. Similarly, school districts often directly hire or contract behavioral health providers to serve schools exclusively.

Many States also operate on a county structure where each has its own state funds, county administration of Medicaid funds, and behavioral health leadership structure. Locally, organizations such as Youth Service Bureaus, hospital systems, and non-profit behavioral health providers may utilize private, local, or regional funds through hospital system budgets, State, local, and National fundraising campaigns and events, United Way, or community foundations. Many states also operate Local Systems of Care organized around

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4 http://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/explainer/2022/sep/behavioral-health-care-what-it-and-how-it-works

National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Service
5910 National Dr., Suite 200
Burtonsville, MD 20866

(888) 909-2209
bridges4mentalhealth.org

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