



July 11, 2024

John FitzGerald, Chair  
Committee on Public Health, Homelessness, & Recovery  
Boston City Council  
City Hall, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Boston, MA 02201

**RE: Docket #0478, Order for a hearing on provisions of temporary mental health treatment or interventions and preventions for children and youth before formal diagnosis, sponsored by Councilor Tania Fernandes Anderson**

Dear Chair FitzGerald and Honorable Members of the Committee on Public Health, Homelessness, & Recovery:

On behalf of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Docket #0478, *Order for a hearing on provisions of temporary mental health treatment or interventions and preventions for children and youth before formal diagnosis*, sponsored by Councilor Tania Fernandes Anderson.

Formed over a century ago, MAMH is dedicated to promoting mental health and well being, while preventing behavioral health conditions and associated disability. We are committed to advancing prevention, early intervention, effective treatment, and research for people of all ages. We seek to eliminate stigma and discrimination and advance full inclusion in all aspects of community life. This includes discrimination affecting not only people with behavioral health conditions, but also people who face unequal burdens and barriers to the protections and benefits of citizenship due to their race, ethnicity, gender identity, or disability status. MAMH has a demonstrated track record of furthering its mission by convening stakeholders across the behavioral health and public health communities; disseminating emerging knowledge; and providing subject matter expertise.

MAMH is also an executive member of the Children's Mental Health Campaign (CMHC). The CMHC is a coalition of families, advocates, health care providers, educators, and consumers from across Massachusetts dedicated to creating a system where all children in Massachusetts have access to resources that can prevent, diagnose, and treat mental health conditions in a timely, effective, and compassionate way. Likewise, MAMH also holds two seats on the Executive Office of Health and Human Services Community Behavioral Health Promotion and Prevention Commission. The Commission works to promote positive mental, emotional and behavioral health; early intervention for people with mental health conditions; and the prevention of substance use conditions.

### **The Need for Mental Health Promotion and Prevention of Mental Health Conditions Among Youth**

Most children and adolescents experience positive mental health, and it is a normal part of development for them to experience a wide range of emotions. However, youth have been particularly vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes stemming from COVID-19. Isolation, changes in routine, anxiety and uncertainty associated with the virus, financial and food insecurity, and parental stress all negatively impacted child mental health. This puts youth at risk for mental health and substance use challenges that left unaddressed can create lifelong difficulties.

According to the most recent data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly three in five (57%) U.S. teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021, representing a nearly 60% increase and the highest level reported over the past decade. Nearly one in three (30%) seriously considered attempting suicide. LGBTQ+ youth are also particularly vulnerable. The data showed that more than half (52%) of LGBTQ+ students had recently experienced poor mental health and more than 22% attempted suicide in the past year.<sup>i</sup>

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Here in Boston, as reported by the Boston Public Health Commission in the “Health of Boston 2024 Mental Health Report, Boston’s youth reported increased feelings of persistent sadness from 2015 to 2021. Latinx youth reported feelings of persistent sadness at higher rates than White youth, and both Black and Latinx youth had higher rates of attempted suicides than their White counterparts. Moreover, youth that identify as LGBTQ+ experienced higher rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts than their heterosexual and non-LGBTQ+ peers. Finally, Black adolescents experienced higher rates of mental health emergency department visits than White adolescents, with the highest rates among Black female youth.<sup>ii</sup>

Compared to adults the COVID-19 pandemic may continue to have increased adverse consequences on youth mental health over the longer-term.<sup>iii</sup> Mental health concerns and conditions can interfere with academic performance, social development, and health. Too many children, adolescents, and their families lack the information, skills, and support needed to understand or navigate these experiences.

### **An Array of Supports and Interventions: Community, School, and Clinical**

There is an array of mental health services and supports available to children and adolescents without a formal diagnosis, but clearly not enough capacity to meet the need. This is critical because roughly half of all lifetime mental health conditions onset by mid-teens and seventy-five percent onset by the mid-twenties.<sup>iv</sup> At the same time, there is a median 11-year delay between the onset of mental health conditions and the first treatment contact.<sup>v</sup> Youth with untreated mental health conditions are more likely to suffer from strained family and peer relationships, poor academic performance, absenteeism and tardiness, suspensions and expulsions, higher dropout rates, substance use, and involvement in the juvenile justice system.<sup>vi</sup>

As a society, we are clearly missing opportunities to identify signs and symptoms of mental health conditions in youth at an early stage, and connect youth and their families to evidence-based and therapeutic treatments. Outlined below are select, low threshold mental health promotion and prevention supports and services available to youth in the Boston area. In presenting these, MAMH aims to support Committee members in: 1) evaluating potential funding of mental health services for youth in Boston or funding the expansion of such programs; 2) identifying opportunities for collaboration among stakeholders; and 3) providing information to support your offices in connecting constituents to local resources:

#### **Community-Based Supports and Interventions**

- Doc Wayne’s Chalk Talk® Program – In 2019, Doc Wayne received a Children’s Behavioral Health Innovation Award, co-funded by the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation, the Charles F. and Beatrice D. Adams Charitable Trust, and MAMH, for its innovation in filling an unmet need in the children’s behavioral health delivery system. Chalk Talk® reimagines group therapy through the lens of team sports such as soccer, basketball, and flag-football. Trained clinicians, known as coaches, leverage sports to teach youth about important life skills like teamwork, relationship building, confidence, perseverance, and resilience. Chalk Talk® is a mobile service. Sessions are provided on-site at a school or community center’s gym, field, or another comparable space.<sup>vii</sup>
- Peer-Empowered Support Groups – MAMH, with funding from and in partnership with the Mosakowski Family Foundation, seeks to facilitate access to peer-empowered support groups for middle and high school age youth to improve their emotional health and well-being. This model was inspired by a promising program at St. Benedict’s Preparatory School in Newark, New Jersey, which serves primarily Black and Brown students from urban neighborhoods (89%). Peer-empowered support groups can reinforce youth agency, resiliency, and perseverance, facilitating connections with other students by providing a forum for listening and place of support in a stigma-free environment. The Mosakowski Family Foundation and MAMH will be partnering with three Boys & Girls Clubs in the

Commonwealth to promote the development of peer-empowered support groups, including the Boys & Girls Club of Dorchester. Programming will start in August/September of 2024.

- Young Adult Access Centers - Young Adult Access Centers are unique community spaces that allow young adults with mental health concerns to access services and supports. The Centers are funded through the Department of Mental Health (DMH). All services are free and all young adults are welcome (youth do not need to be a DMH client or have a diagnosis). Services offered include: peer support; social activities; linkages to health care, housing, employment, education, and other resources; behavioral health supports; individual support to identify and achieve goals; and amenities such as showers, laundry, kitchens, and computer/Wi-Fi access.<sup>viii</sup> There is one Center in Boston at Children’s Services of Roxbury (207 Dudley Street, Roxbury).
- Mental Health and Gender-Affirming Care Resource Guide for Massachusetts LGBTQ2IA+ Young People and Their Trusted Adults – In January 2023, then Attorney General Maura Healey released [this Guide](#) with information about specialized mental health services available throughout the Commonwealth for LGBTQ2IA+ youth. The Guide includes mental health providers in every county in the state who offer care that is affirming of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and also has a Social Connection section, which lists local communities that offer acceptance to LGBTQ2IA+ youth and promote positive and inclusive youth development.<sup>ix</sup>
- Hey Sam – “[Hey Sam](#)” is a service that complements the Commonwealth’s new [Behavioral Health Help Line \(BHHL\)](#) and the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#). Hey Sam is a peer-to-peer texting service for youth up to age 24 that are feeling lonely, depressed, overwhelmed, or having thoughts of suicide. It is operated by the Samaritans, and all services are free and confidential. Youth can reach Hey Sam by texting 439-726 between the hours of 9:00 AM – 12:00 AM ET. Since Hey Sam launched in March 2022, over 3,000 young people have used the service.<sup>x</sup>
- Handhold MA – [Handhold MA](#) was created in 2023 by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, Office of the Child Advocate, and Executive Office of Health and Human Services. Handhold MA is designed to guide parents and caregivers in caring for their child’s mental health and emotional well-being. The site offers a variety of tips, tools, and resources.<sup>xi</sup>

### **School-Based Supports and Interventions**

- Mental Health Education in Schools – MAMH, with the Children’s Mental Health Campaign, has long advocated for all K-12 schools to teach mental health education to their students. Studies of several mental health education programs indicate that they are effective in improving knowledge about mental health, helping to decrease stigma, and increasing students’ willingness to ask for and receive help for mental health problems.<sup>xii</sup> In September 2023, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved an updated [Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Framework \(CHPE\)](#). Topics in the Framework include Mental and Emotional Health, and Substance Use and Misuse, among others. The Framework offers age-appropriate guidelines for students in grades Pre-K-12.<sup>xiii</sup> With the new Framework, schools will now have much better guidance as to what to teach to their students and when. MAMH recently completed an analysis of 20 mental health education curricula, comparing them to the learning standards in the Framework. MAMH will share these findings with DESE to support schools with implementation of the Framework.
- School-Based Behavioral Health Technical Assistance Center - Beginning in the 2020-2021 school year, the BIRCh Project at the University of Massachusetts (UMass Boston and UMass Amherst), contracted with the Department of Mental Health (DMH) to create a plan for the development of a School-Based Behavioral Health Technical Assistance Center (SBBH TA Center). The SBBH TA Center: 1) strengthens

school districts' capacity to promote wellness, including behavioral health; 2) enhances partnerships between school districts, and with state and community agencies/organizations; 3) develops the children's school-based behavioral health workforce; and 4) improves access to, and effectiveness of, high-quality and culturally and contextually responsive school-based behavioral health services. In the past year, the SBBH TA Center served 106 Massachusetts school districts with shared resources, materials, consultation, and trainings. It also served 24 school districts through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) focused on creating community for early career teachers and building district capacity to implement universal behavioral health screening.<sup>xiv</sup>

- MassHealth Coverage of Preventive Behavioral Health Services for Youth without a Diagnosis  
In August 2021, MassHealth issued [Managed Care Entity Bulletin 65](#), which required its managed care plans to cover medically necessary *preventive* behavioral health services for members from birth until age 21. The bulletin allows youth to receive preventive behavioral health services if they have a positive behavioral health screen (or, in the case of an infant, a positive post-partum depression screening), *even if they do not meet criteria for behavioral health diagnosis*.

Managed care plans must cover services delivered in community- and school-based outpatient settings (groups sessions only) and must cover services provided by a behavioral health clinician in integrated pediatric primary care settings (individual, family, and group sessions). All preventive behavioral health services must be provided by a qualified and credentialed behavioral health clinician, or a non-licensed clinician or trainee under supervision.<sup>xv</sup>

This opportunity for community- and school-based outpatient settings, and integrated primary care settings, to bill for preventive behavioral health services has been underutilized to-date. However, it represents an important revenue source for providers to sustain the delivery of preventive services.

### Clinical Supports and Interventions

- Pediatric Behavioral Health Urgent Care – MassHealth members (and some commercial plan members) with urgent behavioral health needs can be seen at a behavioral health urgent care site. An urgent need may include changes in behavior or thoughts that cause distress and require immediate support through psychiatric evaluation or therapy. This may also include substance use that requires immediate intervention. It does NOT include people with immediate risk of harm to themselves or others (in this case, please call the Behavioral Health Help Line at 833-773-2445).<sup>xvi</sup> There are three sites that provide pediatric behavioral health urgent care in Boston:
  - Boston Medical Center, Community Behavioral Health Center  
850 Harrison Ave, Boston, MA 02118
  - Brighton Allston Mental Health Association, a Program of Italian Home for Children  
77B Warren Street, Brighton, MA 02135
  - North Suffolk Community Services, Community Behavioral Health Center  
14 Porter St, East Boston, MA 02128

MAMH, with funding from Mass General Brigham, the Charles F. and Beatrice D. Adams Charitable Trust, and the American Enterprise Foundation, has awarded seven Community Behavioral Health Centers (CBHC) grants to better support students with urgent mental health and substance use needs. The CBHCs are collaborating with one or more schools to implement a [behavioral health urgent care model](#) that includes assessments for students with an emerging behavioral health needs, extended hours, referrals, same-day access to psychiatric consultation, and 24/7 access to crisis services if needed. The services are designed to provide an effective alternative to the use of police or 911 crisis calls for students in emotional distress; minimize emergency department visits than can best be addressed with earlier, less intensive interventions; and minimize school expulsions, suspensions, and

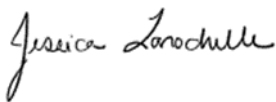
absences due to behavioral health concerns. This funding is supporting a partnership between the Boston Medical Center CBHC and the UP Academy Dorchester.

- Integrated Behavioral Health in Pediatric Primary Care/Collaborative Care - MAMH is a major proponent of delivery of screening, early intervention, and routine treatment for behavioral health conditions in primary care settings. Primary care integration is key to early identification of emerging mental health and substance use conditions and early intervention to timely treat diagnosed conditions and mitigate disability associated with late treatment. Reaching children and families early is critical to optimizing opportunity over the life course, and the pediatric medical home is an effective point of entry for behavioral health as it is a non-stigmatized and trusted source of care.<sup>xvii</sup>

There are a number of initiatives underway in the Commonwealth and Boston to promote widespread dissemination of integrated behavioral health in pediatric primary care. The Boston Foundation has been funding pediatric primary care practices to ensure that families with young children, ages 0-3, receive support aligned with their needs through the HealthySteps program.<sup>xviii</sup> The Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation and the Klarman Family Foundation are supporting TeamUp, which improves access to evidence-informed, integrated pediatric behavioral health care in structurally marginalized communities. The TeamUp model is being implemented in seven federally qualified health centers; the Hub is at Boston Medical Center and Health Care For All is providing policy and advocacy support.<sup>xix</sup> The Pediatric Physicians' Organization at Children's (PPOC) has also successfully integrated mental health care throughout its practices. Finally, MAMH recently secured support from the Bowman Family Foundation and the Goodness Web to advance adoption of the Collaborative Care Model (CoCM), an evidence-based model for primary care and behavioral health integration. Initial work for this project includes scanning the policy, regulatory, and service delivery environment to identify and illuminate opportunities and obstacles to CoCM adoption and scaling, and engaging policymakers, payers, providers, and stakeholders to inform the landscape analysis.

MAMH is deeply committed to the science of prevention, behavioral health promotion, health equity, trauma-informed services, and early intervention. Please do not hesitate to be in contact should you have questions, would like additional information, or if MAMH can serve as a resource to your critical work at [jessicalarochelle@mamh.org](mailto:jessicalarochelle@mamh.org). Thank you.

Sincerely,



Jessica Larochelle, MPH  
Co-Director for Public Policy and Government Relations

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<sup>i</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. U.S. Teen Girls Experiencing Increased Sadness and Violence. 13 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2023/p0213-yrbs.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Boston Public Health Commission. Health of Boston 2024 Mental Health Report. 2024. Available at: [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2024/03/HOB\\_MentalHealth\\_2024.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2024/03/HOB_MentalHealth_2024.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup> Meherali S, Punjani N, Louie-Poon S, Abdul Rahim K, Das JK, Salam RA, Lassi ZS. Mental Health of Children and Adolescents Amidst COVID-19 and Past Pandemics: A Rapid Systematic Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021 Mar 26;18(7):3432. doi: 10.3390/ijerph18073432. PMID: 33810225; PMCID: PMC8038056.

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- <sup>vii</sup> Doc Wayne. Chalk Talk®. Available at: <https://docwayne.org/chalk-talk/>
- <sup>viii</sup> Speaking of Hope. Access Centers. Available at: <https://www.speakingofhope.org/access-centers/>.
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- <sup>xii</sup> Salerno J. (2016). Effectiveness of universal school-based mental health awareness programs among youth in the United States: A systematic review. *J. School Health* 86(12): pp. 922–931.
- <sup>xiii</sup> MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Curriculum Frameworks. Available at: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html>.
- <sup>xiv</sup> The BIRCh Project. Development and implementation of the Massachusetts technical assistance center for school-based behavioral health. Available at: [https://www.umb.edu/media/umassboston/content-assets/birch/research-evaluation/BIRCh\\_SBBH\\_Technical\\_Assistance\\_Report\\_August\\_202178.pdf](https://www.umb.edu/media/umassboston/content-assets/birch/research-evaluation/BIRCh_SBBH_Technical_Assistance_Report_August_202178.pdf)
- <sup>xv</sup> MassHealth. Managed Care Entity Bulletin 65: Preventive Behavioral Health Services for Members Younger than 21. August 2021. Available at: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/managed-care-entity-bulletin-65-preventive-behavioral-health-services-for-members-younger-than-21-0/download>.
- <sup>xvi</sup> MA Executive Office of Health and Human Services. Behavioral Health Urgent Care. Available at: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/behavioral-health-urgent-care>.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Massachusetts Executive Office of Health & Human Services, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Boston Public Health Commission, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Early Childhood Mental Health Matters... and it Works: Positive Outcomes of ECMH Integration in Primary Care. Available at: <http://www.ecmhatters.org/Pages/ECMHMatters.aspx>
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