



Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Inc.

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Overwhelming Majority of Kansans Continue to Support Increased Investment in Mental Health System

Topeka—Now, more than ever, it is vital that the State of Kansas invests in its mental health system. Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) are essential health care providers and are the safety net for Kansans with mental health needs. A recent public opinion poll shows that an overwhelming majority of Kansans support increasing the State’s investment in mental health services.

In August, the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas (ACMHCK), for the second year in a row, commissioned a public opinion poll of likely Kansas voters, conducted by the Remington Research Group. The results are clear. Kansans overwhelmingly support increased investment in mental health:

- 57% know someone who suffers from mental illness or mental health issues (compared to 48% in 2019)
- 76% think we should continue to increase investments in mental health services (compared to 76% in 2019)

“This poll validates what we found a year ago, which is that Kansans increasingly value mental health treatment and services as part of their health care service array,” said Kyle Kessler, Executive Director of the ACMHCK.

The Kansas Mental Health Reform Act of 1990 was designed to shift the focus from serving individuals in state psychiatric hospitals to ensuring access to timely, effective treatment in the community. At that time, CMHCs were serving approximately 80,000 people. By 2019, CMHCs

were providing treatment to over 145,000 Kansans. It is estimated that one in five people will experience a mental health illness in their lifetime, and anyone may experience challenges in life that can impact their mental health.

Funding for community mental health has not kept pace with the demand. For over a decade beginning in 2006, funding for CMHCs either was reduced or remained stagnant until the Legislature began helping to restore funding in 2017. Recognizing the necessity to support the increasing demand for services, earlier this year, the Legislature approved increases in State funding and payment rates, but those investments were later cut from the budget.

According to Kessler, “CMHCs do an extraordinary job of supporting their communities and providing mental and behavioral health services to individuals in need. By state law, they are mandated to serve all individuals, regardless of their ability to pay. However, reductions in state funding, workforce shortages, and demand for services have strained the system.”

Recognizing the disparity between the need for services and the funding to support them, the Kansas Mental Health Task Force, authorized by the Legislature in 2017 and 2018, stated in their final report, “for behavioral health systems to operate effectively, they need adequate capacity,” and “capacity issues or barriers to behavioral health services significantly harm patient, societal, and system-level outcomes.” In 2020, the Legislature has authorized a special committee on Mental Health Modernization and Reform to further analyze the system and study its capacity.

The current Covid-19 public health crisis has placed an additional strain on an already overburdened system. “Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, CMHCs had to fundamentally change the way we do business and provide services to keep patients safe. Practically overnight, we implemented new service delivery measures, including telehealth,” said Randy Callstrom, CEO of Wyandot Behavioral Health Network and President of the ACMHCK. “Now, as we have reopened to allow for in-person services, we are simultaneously planning for the possibility of having to close offices and pivot back to providing only telehealth services in the event of virus exposure, while also preparing for an increase in demand for mental health services and treatment due to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and social isolation. To meet the needs of today, we must fully fund the mental health system.”

Full poll results are available at www.acmhck.org.

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In Kansas, Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCS) provide behavioral health services in all 105 counties, 24-hours a day, seven days a week. CMHCs are the local Mental Health Authorities coordinating the delivery of publicly funded community-based mental health services and are required to provide services to all Kansans needing them, regardless of their ability to pay. This makes the community mental health system the safety net for Kansans with behavioral health needs.