



MONTEREY COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Avanzando Juntos Forward Together

COMMUNITY PROGRAM PLANNING PROCESS FY 2023-2024 STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY

Prepared by:

EVALCORP
Measuring What MattersSM

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INTRODUCTION

In 2004, California voters passed the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) through Proposition 63, which designated funding to improve mental health service systems throughout the state. To ensure effective utilization of these funds, the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) requires counties receiving MHSA funds to develop a comprehensive Three-Year Program and Expenditure Plan outlining how funds will be used. This plan must be created in partnership with local Stakeholders and community members through the Community Program Planning (CPP) Process.

Monterey County Behavioral Health Bureau (MCBH) contracted with EVALCORP, a professional evaluation company, to support an assessment of behavioral and mental health needs in communities throughout Monterey County. To gather comprehensive insights across the County, EVALCORP, engaged both Stakeholders (those providing or facilitating access to services) and Community Members (individuals from the community who may benefit from behavioral health services) using a mixed-methods approach including listening sessions, focus groups/interviews, and surveys. The purpose of these assessments, which are a part of the CPP Process, was to gather valuable insights from Stakeholders and community members to enhance the effectiveness of behavioral health services in Monterey County, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of all communities.

This Stakeholder Focus Group report describes the needs and barriers to behavioral health services identified by Stakeholders in Monterey County. Findings from other CPP Process data collection activities are also available:

- Stakeholder Survey Summary of Findings
- Community Member Health Survey Summary of Findings
- Community Member Focus Groups Summary of Findings
- Community Member Listening Sessions Summary of Findings

MCBH will use this data to inform resource allocation and prioritization of programs, strategies, and initiatives funded under the Mental Health Services Act.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

EVALCORP collaborated with MCBH to purposefully recruit a diverse set of Stakeholders within the community. A total of 4 focus groups and 1 interview were conducted with 39 participants representing law enforcement, diversity and equity resources, and community-based organizations providing behavioral health prevention and treatment services. MCBH staff involved in the planning process were present during select focus groups to connect with Stakeholders and ask follow-up questions that would be helpful to their planning. After data collection was completed, data were prepped, reviewed, and coded into themes.



FINDINGS

Stakeholders' perspectives on behavioral health issues and services in Monterey County are reflected below. Participants were asked to share insights into behavioral health challenges, populations needing additional support, barriers to accessing care, additional service needs within the county, and recommendations for improving behavioral health services. Results provide insight into the state of behavioral health services and identify opportunities for advancement.

Behavioral Health Issues

A deeper understanding of the most important behavioral health-related issues in the community sheds light on areas in need of additional resources, informing the focus and tailoring of interventions. Participants reported anxiety and depression as significant issues to address in Monterey County.

“Some people call us and say that they haven’t talked to anyone in four days.”

Factors thought by participants to be contributing to community behavioral health challenges included concerns related to basic needs (i.e. food, rent/housing), work, isolation, and loneliness. Missing family and deportation were specifically identified as contributing factors to behavioral health issues for immigrants.

Stakeholders also expressed concern about conflict and substance use issues among youth leading to missed school and academic challenges. Post-traumatic stress, intimate partner violence, and the co-occurrence of mental illness and substance use were additional issues viewed as critical to address in the County.

Findings reveal an assortment of behavioral health issues within the County, often related to social, occupational, and psychological needs. Whole-person-centered approaches to behavioral health that consider individuals' overall well-being may help address the root causes of prevalent mental health and substance use issues.



Behavioral Health Service Needs

Insights from Stakeholders regarding additional behavioral health service needs in Monterey County shed light on the specific community groups requiring the most assistance, as well as the types of support that are highly sought after but currently lack availability. Results are shared through three sub-themes: Priority Groups for Behavioral Health Services, Mental Health and Substance Use Services, and Coordinated and Comprehensive Behavioral Health Support.

Priority Groups for Behavioral Health Services

“The veteran community has high incidents of suicides...there are individuals with PTSD and military sexual trauma.”

Stakeholders shared additional service needs for specific populations within the County. Veterans were described as a population with specific treatment needs resulting from their service. Participants called for more diverse substance use treatment options for Veterans including alternatives to traditional 12-step programs. One participant noted that some veterans are ineligible for assistance

from the Military & Veterans Affairs Office, underscoring the necessity of community support for this demographic.

Focus group participants perceived the services available for individuals experiencing moderate-level mental health issues to be insufficient. While one participant noted mandates by some care systems to provide timely care to individuals experiencing moderate symptoms, many others described long appointment wait times often leading to delayed or no care for this population. Stakeholders emphasized that postponing treatment for moderate mental health concerns could create opportunities for future mental health emergencies. Individuals residing in South Monterey County and rural areas, older adults, and first responders were identified as other groups needing support.

“It may not be a full-blown crisis, but it will lead to that and there is support needed before a crisis.”

Mental Health and Substance Use Services

Stakeholders desired more outpatient and residential services for individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders, especially for youth and the unhoused. Participants wanted more mobile crisis providers to ensure services are available daily. They also felt there were limited crisis stabilization options for children available in schools and the community, with required referrals often delaying care. Other participants perceived virtual appointments to be less effective for substance use treatment, particularly among adolescents, suggesting a need for additional in-person treatment options across age ranges.

“High overdoses in the county “because there is not a viable alternative for kids to go to. Outpatient is not sufficient to meet their needs.””

Focus group participants also emphasized a need for more indoor mental health support groups where individuals could receive help with their issues.



Coordinated and Comprehensive Behavioral Health Support

“The approach seems to be to only deal with what’s happening right now and not address what’s happening in the long-term.”

Stakeholders emphasized the need for long-term support for behavioral health issues to prevent recurring cycles of homelessness, legal issues, and mental health crises. Focus group participants described an absence of post-discharge support critical for ensuring adherence to care plans (e.g., medication compliance, appointment attendance). Greater

communication about the outcomes of referrals was desired to prevent individuals from “slipping through the cracks”.

Focus group participants also desired more consistent and comprehensive support services to address the social needs of individuals experiencing mental health or substance use issues in the County. Many Stakeholders described a shortage of affordable housing in the community, including transitional options, generally and for specific populations experiencing behavioral health issues (i.e. men, those without immigration status, and older adults.) Participants described income, credit, and literacy as barriers to accessing stable living accommodations. Insurance, especially for those without immigration status, and transportation were other social needs prevalent throughout the County.

“People who have been on the streets for years and years with Serious Mental Illness need a place to be housed.”

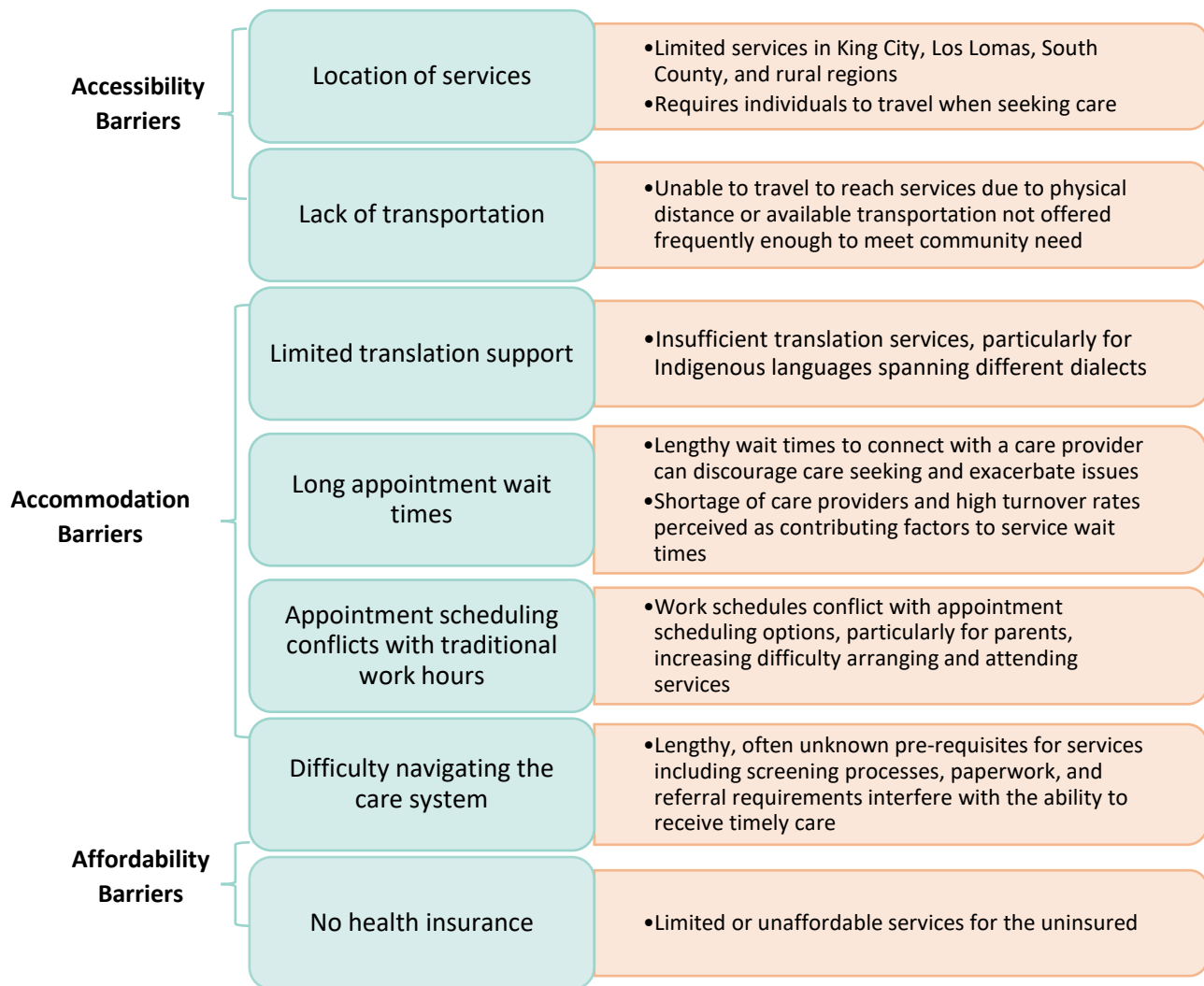
Results highlight a need for greater availability of comprehensive, behavioral health treatment services for the underserved areas and populations identified by Stakeholders. Stronger collaboration among organizations across the County can foster more integrated, support networks aimed at addressing service gaps and ensuring a holistic approach to care.



Barriers to Accessing Care

Obtaining Stakeholder input on obstacles faced by community members when accessing behavioral health services can help the County customize programs and initiatives, effectively enhancing service accessibility for those who need care the most. Findings showcase barriers related to affordability (ability to pay for services), accessibility (distance to services), and accommodation (ability to be seen and treated)¹ can impair community members' ability to receive services in Monterey County (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Barriers to Accessing Care



Barriers to care can also intersect making it even more difficult for individuals to obtain care. For example, several Stakeholders noted the compound challenge of needing translation support along with having to travel to services outside their local community for those experiencing transportation issues.

¹ Penchansky R, Thomas JW. The concept of access: definition and relationship to consumer satisfaction. *Med Care.* 1981;19(2):127-140. doi:10.1097/00005650-198102000-00001



Results suggest services should apply comprehensive care approaches that consider the complex interactions of social, economic, cultural, and structural obstacles community members encounter when seeking help to improve service access.

Successful Behavioral Health Initiatives

Understanding behavioral health services that are positively impacting communities in Monterey County sheds light on strategies that are successfully addressing community needs. Focus group participants identified several interventions that can inspire and inform efforts to improve behavioral health outcomes.

Programs that were hosted locally and culturally tailored were celebrated for providing comfortable, safe spaces for individuals to receive mental health support and education. Stakeholders highlighted resources like WellScreen, MCHOPES, and the local 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for increasing timely access to care. Collaboration between mental health professionals and law enforcement as part of mobile crisis intervention was also commended. The addition of a non-uniformed presence increased approachability, enabling individuals and families at various income levels to be well supported through behavioral health emergencies. Similarly, the Monterey Integrated System Transformation Initiative (MISTI) was praised for working to provide comprehensive services and create welcoming environments for groups typically ineligible for care (e.g. moderate mental illness, SUD, youth). Other successful services included court/legal programming for veterans, therapist-led support groups, and wellness navigators that support individuals throughout their care.

“It is unique to Monterey County – the high level of collaboration between agencies and providers. They are willing to step out of silos to help the community.”

Findings highlight the importance of providing services that are: 1) available where individuals live, work, and play; 2) culturally responsive, 3) comprehensive in addressing behavioral health and other needs, and 4) integrated across organizations with patient navigation.

These principles establish a foundation for addressing the barriers to accessing services described earlier in this report, leading to improved engagement with care among community members.



Recommendations

In addition to providing insight into behavioral health issues, service needs, and positive programming within Monterey County, Stakeholders shared recommendations for enhancing services to better meet the community's needs.

Assistance navigating care systems

- Addition of navigators to help guide individuals through healthcare systems during treatment such as assisting with understanding and fulfilling care requirements, scheduling appointments, accessing financial and social support, and following prescribed care plans.
- Peers with lived experience were viewed as ideal for such positions.

Community education

- More education to community members about mental health and available services to increase knowledge of resources as well as destigmatize mental illness and care seeking.
- Application of a person-centered approach to educational outreach efforts, customizing activities to the specific needs, preferences, and circumstances of different communities.
- Additional community health workers to assist with outreach as well as formal positions in the County responsible for staying up to date on available community resources, regularly sharing such information with Stakeholders.

Comprehensive and integrated care for behavioral health issues that includes social support services

- Greater collaboration between community organizations, care providers, and county agencies to increase awareness of services and care coordination throughout the community.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Stakeholders from a variety of service areas shared valuable information regarding behavioral health including prevalent issues, service needs, barriers to care, current initiatives positively impacting communities, and opportunities for improvement in Monterey County.

Behavioral Health Issues

- Depression and anxiety are perceived as the most common behavioral health issues affecting communities in Monterey County.
- Identified contributors to poor behavioral health include psychological, social, and economic factors.

Behavioral Health Service Needs

- Increased availability of behavioral health treatment options for underserved areas and populations (i.e., rural cities, youth, unhoused, moderate symptoms, and veterans).
- More comprehensive and integrated services throughout the care continuum and across organizations

Barriers to Accessing Care

- Access to care is prevented by social, economic, cultural, and structural barriers that often intersect in community members' lives to further complicate care-seeking.

Successful Behavioral Health Initiatives

- Lessons from successful behavioral health services in the County showcase collaboration, cultural sensitivity, local outreach, and comprehensiveness as strategies for enhancing service engagement and improving outcomes.

Recommendations

- Assistance navigating care systems.
- Community education.
- Comprehensive and integrated care for substance use disorder and mental illness that includes social support services.

The County can leverage insights from Stakeholders and capitalize on existing foundational elements to refine or develop initiatives to address priority behavioral health issues, fill gaps in services, and ensure resources are effectively allocated to increase service access and better meet community behavioral health needs.