

Penta Policy Insiders

Policymaker Perspectives:
**Mental Health
Matters**



Introduction

After cardiovascular diseases and cancer, mental disorders are the third leading cause of “disease burden” around the world.¹ In fact, nearly 1 out of every 5 adults in the United States experiences mental illness, and it is estimated that even more individuals remain undiagnosed. Moreover, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse have also increased.² Mental health has therefore become a top policy priority for policymakers on both sides of the aisle, who feel that making significant changes to how mental health is approached on a national level is more crucial than ever. They also acknowledge that improving mental healthcare in the United States will require deliberate action from multiple levels of government and cooperation with the private sector.

Mental health as a bipartisan priority

Policymakers across the country identify mental health as a top policy priority when asked to determine the most important issues within the healthcare sector.



We’ve had mental health parity for a very long time and it hasn’t been enforced. And I think particularly with so many people needing mental health care, it needs to be treated the same as physical health care. That’s been in law for a while, and unfortunately, that’s not what we’re seeing happen.

Senior Policy Advisor, U.S. House of Representatives, D

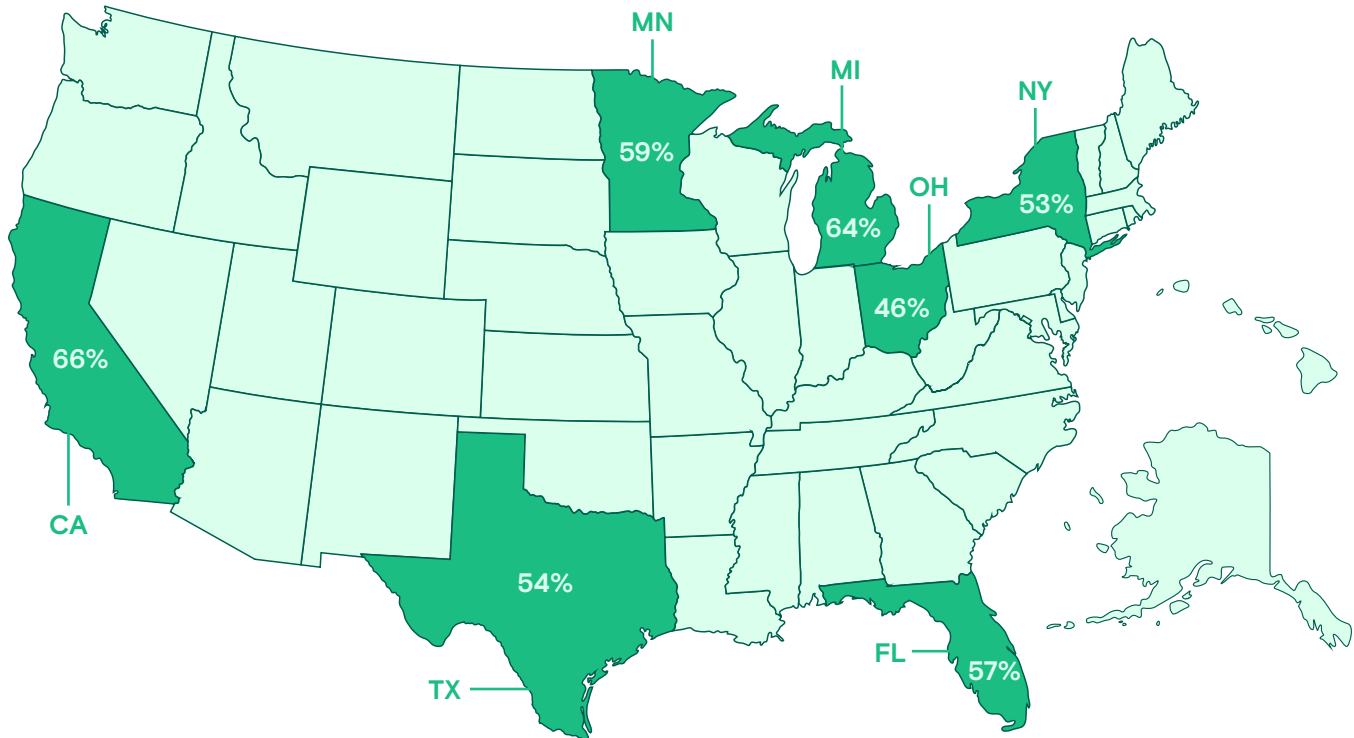


I think there’s begun to be a realization that physical health and mental health are both two sides of the same coin, that they’re both health care... Even in private insurance, seeing a physical health doctor is very easy; trying to get into a mental health counselor [is] very difficult.

Former Legislative Director, U.S. House of Representatives, R

Mental health by state

Percentage of policymakers that selected mental health as a top healthcare issue



Policymakers are aware that mental health has historically been overlooked in favor of physical health, and believe that closing that gap is imperative to addressing accessibility and affordability. For example, a 2022 study found that only around 43 percent of psychiatrists participate in insurance networks, and those individuals were paid 17 percent less than other health specialists. As of December 2022, the reported average out-of-pocket cost for a therapy session in the United States ranges from \$60-\$250, a significant expense, especially for those who need continuous services.³ Affordability issues only compound accessibility challenges.



Mental health care always seems to take a backseat to physical healthcare... When you get to behavioral health, mental health, suddenly it's more on the individual to pay for it and I think that's really counterproductive... I wish it was easier for folks to access it.

Legislative Administrator, Michigan Executive Branch, R



I think [mental health] is a crisis that really needs to be more attention... And there is no good mental healthcare available unless you can afford \$150 an hour... **I don't think the state or the United States is taking it seriously enough.**

Supervisor, Florida Executive Branch, R

COVID-19 and the rise of telemedicine

The COVID-19 pandemic renewed attention for the need for better mental health resources, as well as created the need for more innovative forms of healthcare. Telemedicine, for example, became popular, and increased accessibility for patients by removing barriers such as inadequate public transportation, physician shortages, and other geographical challenges.⁴ In addition, the onset of the pandemic resulted in the loosening of various government regulations, such as the Department of Health and Human Services waiving restrictions for Medicare patients that prevented them from utilizing telehealth services.⁵ Policymakers want to continue looking for ways to provide more equitable mental health services.



We have a long way to go in terms of access and affordability of mental health care, and I think telemedicine will be a part of that. We'd just love to see more access and less stigma and better reimbursement around mental health care.

Senior Policy Advisor, U.S. House of Representatives, D



I think people are realizing that **telehealth is getting to pockets of populations that are forgotten because they don't have a provider near them.** Telehealth removes that barrier.

Former Chief of Staff, Executive, R

Consequences of inadequate preventative care

Failure to provide necessary resources for preventative mental health treatment can have serious impacts on both individuals and communities.⁶ Policymakers express concerns that treatment is often provided after individuals are in crisis, which can lead to additional severe consequences such as homelessness, incarceration, and hospitalization.



We're particularly focused on mental health because I know that especially in [our state] **a lot of our emergency rooms are filled with people who should be getting mental healthcare and don't have any...** And so they end up in the emergency room.

Senior Policy Advisor, U.S. House of Representatives, D



I think **the most important priority is, number one, the mental health issue.** The homeless issue in California is out of control. So that is really an issue for cities trying to deal with the homeless, especially the homeless that don't want help, that are either mentally ill or on drugs.

Councilmember, California Municipality, R



For the better part of 30 to 40 years, Michigan dismantled its public health system... And now we're at a point where, again, with COVID, everyone recognizes that people are struggling and there's just not enough beds. **People end up in the ER when it's a mental health emergency or they're ending up in jail because we don't have the resources to get them what they need.**

Representative, Michigan House of Representatives, D



We don't have a lot of funding for child and adolescent psychiatric care. So often **kids that are as young as 8, 10, 12, end up in the penal system where there isn't treatment, as opposed to mental health care and support for them and their families**, which would dramatically change the outcome in most cases, maybe not all.

Councilperson, Michigan Municipality, I

Conclusion

Policymakers believe that one of the most important steps to improve mental healthcare is prioritizing an open and ongoing conversation with communities, healthcare providers, and policy leaders. Lawmakers want to see more accessible and affordable mental health resources. Policy staff are aware that societal stigma has hindered a productive and open dialogue on mental health, and that addressing these long standing issues will require patience and collaboration across agencies, nonprofits and the private sector.⁷



We have barriers [to mental healthcare], and now **I think that stigma is starting to get removed, but that takes time...** I think people just need to be able to utilize some of these resources that traditionally weren't available... We can talk about it. **We don't talk in the open with regards to behavioral health.** Everything else we can talk about but that we don't.

Former Chief of Staff, Executive, R



We're going to need to work collaboratively with agencies, nonprofits, and so forth to provide the services, food, and ongoing mental health drug treatment for years to come because a lot of these folks are living in these conditions for decades, and it's not going to—we're not going to fix it overnight.

Chief of Staff, California House of Representatives, D

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