

The General Assembly's Current Challenge:

The statewide network of the Georgia Association of Community Service Boards (GACSB) appreciates that the General Assembly faces tremendous challenge helping Georgia navigate the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope our extensive expertise providing mental health, substance abuse and developmental disability services for nearly 30 years will prove helpful as you make decisions about Georgia's future.

GACSB Member Organizations' Scope, Expertise & Unity of Purpose for Georgia

Statewide Safety Net: The statewide GACSB network has a unique role in Georgia's healthcare system. The Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) designates member agencies as Georgia's behavioral health safety net.

Unity of Purpose to Serve ALL Georgians: GACSB members have unmatched unity of purpose for Georgia. GACSB member organizations exist to provide affordable, high quality and community-based behavioral health services to Georgians who would otherwise not have access to care: individuals who are low income, uninsured, underinsured, or who have Medicaid, Medicare or other public insurance.

Largest, Most Experienced Workforce that Serves More Georgians: The statewide GACSB network deploys Georgia's largest and most qualified behavioral health workforce and provides more affordable, high quality and community-based behavioral health services to more Georgians than any other group.

The value of this network to Georgia citizens – as service recipients and taxpayers – cannot be overstated and should not be underestimated.

Pre-COVID-19 realities

- 1 in 5 adults experience mental illness, with anxiety and depression most common. 1 in 7 experience a substance use disorder. 1 in 6 has a developmental disability. (*Kaiser Family Foundation*)
- In 2018: <50% could access treatment. (*Mental Health America*)
- Suicide & drug overdoses are the 3rd and 4th leading cause of premature deaths for Georgians. (*Ga Dept of Public Health*)
- In 2018, 117,208 ER visits were due to mental and behavioral disorders due to psychoactive substance use, that's 1,299 more than ER visits due to motor vehicle crashes. (*Ga Dept of Public Health*)

Coming Added Challenges to Georgia's Behavioral Health Infrastructure:

Based on prior global crises research, GACSB offers these projections regarding additional secondary health sequelae of COVID-19:

- The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will worsen in the coming months as more people experience illness, job losses and isolation, and self-medicate by drinking and drug use. Models project as much as a 41% increase over 2018 numbers of "deaths of despair" (suicide, drug misuse). (*Well Being Trust & Robert Graham Center*)
- This pandemic has the potential to have a 13.3% increase in drug related deaths and 13.9% increase in opioid related deaths due to higher unemployment. (*Hollingsworth, et al, 2017*)
- At a time when easy access to quality care is even more vital, as many as 581,820 new Georgians and their family members will have lost job-based insurance coverage as the result of coronavirus-fueled layoffs. (*Georgia Department of Labor, April 2020*)
- Research has shown that for every 1% increase in unemployment rate, suicides increase ~ 1.6%. (*Kawhol & Nordt, 2020*)

Populations at highest risk include:

- First responders & frontline workers
- Older adults
- Children & adolescents
- People with pre-existing health conditions, including individuals with developmental disabilities
- Women
- Minority and economically disenfranchised groups
- Individuals with poor healthcare access

GACSB Counsel for Most Prudent COVID-19 Response

- Ensure ready access to mental health and substance use treatment
- Ensure widespread availability of emergency mental health and psychosocial support
- Support recovery from COVID-19 by building mental health services for the future

Accordingly, it would benefit all Georgians for the General Assembly to act quickly to reinforce and prepare Georgia's safety net for behavioral health and intellectual/developmental disabilities to respond to the impending additional need and demand brought on by COVID-19.



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