

Behavioral health providers call for nearly \$40B in federal relief funds

Behavioral health providers were already operating on slim margins before the Covid-19 pandemic. Now they're faced with lower revenues and higher costs—and the possibility of pent-up demand.

To help address those challenges, the National Council for Behavioral Health and 40 other industry groups are calling on the federal government to set aside \$38.5 billion in relief for the sector. State Sen. Pete Harckham, chairman of the Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, presented the request to New York's congressional delegation.

Nearly \$40 billion in funding would help ensure that behavioral health providers can remain open and maintain operations during the pandemic.

Behavioral health providers have been taking in less revenue from patient visits, transitioning as much business as possible to telehealth services and continuing to provide care to patients who have lost their health insurance, Harckham said. At the same time, they are responding to virus-induced fear, isolation and financial insecurity that is exacerbating mental health conditions and substance-use disorder.

"They have real financial needs," Harckham said. "We're appropriately giving federal relief to small businesses, but we can't forget about our behavioral health providers."

Workforce shortages have historically plagued the industry due to its inability to pay wages high enough to attract and retain employees, he said. Now that's coupled with worker concern over virus exposure and whether there is enough personal protective equipment to safely care for patients.

"The risk is no different from someone walking into a counseling session than from someone walking into a doctor's office," Harckham said. "If they're going to be out on the front lines, they need the appropriate PPE and safeguards."

The goal is to earmark federal funding that would be distributed nationally but prioritized to behavioral health providers in hard-hit areas like New York, said Nadia Chait, associate director of policy and advocacy at the Coalition for Behavioral Health, which is among the organizations calling for the relief.

Though a previous \$100 billion haul for health care facilities was doled out based on Medicare reimbursement, many of the coalition's members are paid by Medicaid, Chait noted. Behavioral health providers could use the requested federal funds for PPE, incentive payments for staff—particularly those in high-risk residential facilities—and even

phones or tablets for patients who otherwise would not be able to access telehealth services.

Medicaid covers the bulk of mental health and substance-use-disorder services provided via telehealth—including over the phone—at the same rates as if they were provided in person, Chait noted. Medicare is covering telehealth that includes the video component, and commercial insurance is covering virtual services at varying degrees.

Amy Dorin, president and CEO of the coalition, reiterated that the behavioral health sector was struggling even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Reimbursement rates have remained stagnant for years, she said.

Within weeks of the Covid-19 crisis emerging, providers have turned to lines of credit to pay for PPE and other unbudgeted expenses, Dorin said.

Additionally, they're already seeing upticks in demand.

"This pandemic—as horrific as 9/11 was—is different and scarier because each one of us is at risk of getting sick," Dorin said. "The need for behavioral health services is going to be off the charts."

Harckham agreed: "We've always been one of the states with the highest need. With the high number of coronavirus cases, we have more stressors."

Behavioral health providers have to be included in federal relief, he urged. "They need this financial lifeline."