

Meet the New ‘Chief of Staff’ in Mental Health: AI

By Ashleigh Hollowell | February 17, 2026

Artificial intelligence went from being seen as a complex technology that rarely entered conversations to one of the most discussed topics in the workplace zeitgeist. It's not only changing the way business is done on a large scale, but generative AI tools like Google's Gemini, OpenAI's ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude are changing how mental health executives do their work daily.

AI has brought efficiency and change to industries like health care that have long been burdened by antiquated technologies and cumbersome workflows. Beyond the tools that it's baked into, AI has increasingly become a thought partner to executives as they move through their individual workflows, brainstorm strategies and organize priorities. A [July 2025 report](#) found that 72% of vice president and C-suite level executives use AI daily and tend to use it four times more often than frontline workers.

In practice across the behavioral health sector, this looks like using ChatGPT or Gemini to remove friction and paperwork, draft emails, prep for meetings, structure programming, ask for feedback or suggest changes to a process, executives shared with Behavioral Health Business.

“The easiest way for me to say it is almost that AI is like a chief of staff of sorts, where I still have to be the editor and the final decision maker, but it has definitely streamlined things and it has made a lot of the redundant tasks that I do on a daily basis a lot quicker,” Howard Barker, executive director of business development at Your Behavioral Health, told BHB.

Your Behavioral Health is a Torrance, California-based provider of mental health, therapy, psychiatry, and substance use disorder (SUD) care with several dozen residential, inpatient and outpatient programs.

“I think in a lot of ways it frequently gives better outputs than a lower-level executive assistant could when it comes to bouncing certain ideas off of it,” Barker said. “I’d say on the scale of hyper-optimistic to cynical, I fall in the middle where I definitely use it on a daily basis, but I’m also very in touch with the fact that you can’t let it run wild.”

Dr. Kathryn Boger, co-founder and chief clinical officer at InStride Health, has independently worked to refine her AI prompting skills, which she told BHB have added enormous value to her workflow, and are something she anticipates future executives will also need to be well-versed in.

“The prompting alone is a real skill,” Boger said. “Before I do any task at work, I will deliberately pause and ask myself where AI can add leverage. I will usually recognize the need for the AI executive assistant to support me before I jump into strategy work or mapping out proposals.”

Sometimes, Boger will assign AI a role like “consultant” to roleplay as a strategic thought partner for a scenario or strategy she is trying to solve an issue within, “so that it is not replacing my judgment, but it’s expanding it,” she said.

Not long ago, Boger was working on building support for InStride’s clinical evaluator team and entered a prompt into a generative AI tool that described the work she was doing with this team and her goal of standardizing decision-making within it. The tool returned with opportunities where Boger could leverage AI both in her role and for this particular team, including things she hadn’t considered before. Incorporating AI and outfitting it for a role on that specific team as its “expert assessment consultant” to weigh in on certain clinical fit decisions has been one of its more impactful decisions, she explained.

The concept was piloted and so successful that InStride plans to roll the feature out to its full clinical evaluator team in the coming months.

“The key is always having my judgment as a human intervene at every step in terms of framing the questions for AI and then validating and refining the output,” Boger said. “Because of the fact that AI can be a sycophant, I deliberately ask it to challenge my assumptions and surface where there are risks or blind spots, too.”

Rob Marsh, CEO of Bradford Health Services, told BHB that Microsoft’s Copilot is one of the main tools he uses to organize emails, prioritize daily tasks and massage language for the newsletter to ensure it hits the right tone. Marsh echoed Boger’s comments, underscoring that while AI can guide it, ultimately, clinical decision-making should be left to humans.

“I don’t think it’ll ever replace the executives themselves,” Marsh said. “There’s always going to be a need for a steady hand at the wheel. But it does provide a lot more information. It does provide a lot more data that helps us make better strategic decisions.”

As the leader of a behavioral health company that offers SUD treatment, one of the most important ways they have utilized AI is for demand analysis. SUD, in particular, is a sector often strapped for both resources and staff. Being able to pull together claims data, occupancy levels and information about a specific region all at once allows Marsh and his team to pivot and reallocate resources to best fit market trends and changes in demand — something that “would have taken weeks to get a good understanding of,” without it, he said.

As it has become such a powerful tool across industries, Marsh said understanding how to use it and which AI tool to utilize will be just as important as leadership abilities.

“I think that executives are really going to have to be able to evaluate the AI itself and that’s a skill that we’re refining right now as executives, as leaders,” Marsh said. “AI is a valuable tool that often brings really good information and insights to the table, particularly generative AI. It’s hard to

describe the productivity pickup that we get with it, but in and of itself, AI is a tool and executives have to be able to evaluate for themselves, is this the right tool for me? Is this tool providing me with the information that I need?”

Unlike other technologies, advancements in AI’s capabilities happen rapidly and that rapid evolution will also be a demand that executives of today and tomorrow have to rise to meet themselves, Barker added.

“We’ve seen it since the Industrial Revolution. Anytime a new technology like this comes out and it does formatively change the way that work is done, generally in that process, it creates new jobs and roles,” Barker said. “It doesn’t just remove them. But in order to continue to take advantage of those new roles, people have to evolve and have to learn how to use those new tools. Part of that is everyone has to start learning how to think from a project management perspective even if you’re not a project manager.”

BHB asked other behavioral health executives how they have begun incorporating AI into their workflows. The following responses have been lightly edited for clarity.

BHB: How is AI changing the way you work as an executive in the mental health field?

Dr. Monika Roots, co-founder and president of Bend Health, a Lyra Health company: AI has become a way for me to keep a constant pulse on what’s happening across healthcare and behavioral health. Regulation changes quickly. Market dynamics shift. Health plans and systems are under financial pressure.

AI helps me stay informed in real time so I can understand where the industry is headed and how that affects mental health care delivery. I use it to track healthcare regulation, funding trends, acuity changes, and what employers and health plans are focused on. Mental health doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It’s intertwined with the broader healthcare system, so understanding that full landscape helps me make more informed strategic decisions.

As a leader, it’s less about replacing my judgment and more about improving the inputs that inform it.

Dr. Lauren Grawert, chief medical officer of Aware Recovery Care: AI has meaningfully shifted how I allocate my time and attention. It has become a kind of cognitive “force multiplier,” allowing me to move faster through daily information synthesis, planning, and sense-making, which frees up more space for human-centered leadership — relationship building, clinical judgment, and strategic decision-making. In mental health especially, this matters: the less time spent on administrative or repetitive cognitive labor, the more bandwidth I have for nuance, ethics, and presence with teams and partners.

Alon Joffe, CEO at Eleos Health: When I turn the AI lens on myself and my team, I’m assessing AI systems and tools that do two things: reduce the administrative burden while respecting the high standards we hold ourselves to. The biggest change has been the amount of time I spend vetting and discussing new AI use cases and tools with my team. But because we’ve been in the AI space for so

long (pre-ChatGPT launch), I view the day-to-day work as gradually evolving alongside new tools rather than an abrupt change that some companies in the space are experiencing.

Building AI for behavioral health carries both privilege and enormous responsibility. The conversation is the treatment in our field. We're dealing with people's most vulnerable moments, and every decision I make as CEO must balance innovation velocity with clinical rigor, security, and ethics.

Charm Lea, president of Ascension Recovery Services: We are using AI within the EMR to reduce documentation burden — for progress notes, intake assessments, etc. AI can look for patterns in patient data to flag relapse risk, ID med interactions, identify missing documentation, and help support the billing process. We haven't started using it yet for predictive outcomes, but that's on the horizon, also using it to monitor status and early detection of return to use. We are exploring using it for staffing workflow as it relates to predicting census changes, suggesting optimal staffing levels, automate scheduling — but we haven't implemented it.

BHB: What are some of your favorite tools, use cases, or prompts that you regularly utilize for your work?

Roots: I use ChatGPT and Gemini regularly, especially for healthcare-related research and organizing complex information. ChatGPT helps me quickly understand what's happening in the industry, while Gemini tends to be more focused and less verbose when I'm organizing my thoughts.

My most common use case is keeping a constant pulse on the healthcare landscape. I look at regulation changes, financial pressures on health systems, employer trends, and how those forces affect behavioral health access and acuity. I also use AI to explore topics like medication shortages and how they impact mental health care delivery. It's essentially become a real-time research assistant that helps me stay current without spending hours digging through multiple sources.

Grawert: I primarily use AI for:

- Strategic thinking support (e.g., pressure-testing assumptions, exploring second- and third-order implications of decisions)
- Summarizing complex inputs (research, policy updates, meeting notes) into executive-level takeaways

Prompts I rely on often include variations of: "Act as a healthcare executive with expertise in behavioral health — what risks, blind spots, or ethical considerations might I be missing here?" That perspective-shifting has been especially valuable.

My favorite AI tools are Chat GPT, Gemini, Claude, Microsoft Copilot, and OpenEvidence, which is like Chat GPT but specifically for doctors and with academic-only sources. I really love OpenEvidence!

Joffe: Google's Notebook LM has been extremely exciting to work with internally. You can use it to create a draft slide or to summarize content, and they launched a feature that lets you upload large datasets and generate data tables.

Christy Doneoff on our Strategic Partnership team used it to create a five-minute, on-the-spot video with a prospective client's real-world data. With a QR code, a form, and some automation, you can create something almost instantly that meets branding requirements, uses real data, and serves as a useful tool for engaging prospects on calls or at conferences. She turned what is often a tedious task into something more creative and personalized. Importantly, she did this while maintaining control over the data. I love that my team is responsibly experimenting with these tools and sharing their knowledge to make the entire company better. It's a great example of using AI to build that person-to-person connection.