Date: August 2026
To: All Contracted Behavioral Health Providers
From: CalOptima Health Behavioral Health Integration Department
Subject: Urgent Appointment Timeliness and Utilizing 988 for Department of Managed Health Care and National Committee for Quality Assurance Compliance

Dear Provider Partner,

As part of our commitment to delivering accessible, high-quality behavioral health care, we require all contracted providers to meet National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) guidelines. This memo outlines your obligations for urgent non-life-threatening emergency appointments and how to integrate the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline to remain compliant with our six-hour urgent access standard.

1. The Urgent Access Standard

NCQA standards dictate that members requesting urgent behavioral health appointments — where care is needed to prevent serious deterioration in health — must be seen by a qualified practitioner **within six hours** of the request.

2. Utilizing 988 for After-Hours and Triage

If your office cannot directly accommodate a member within the six-hour window, or if a crisis occurs outside of standard business hours, you or your voicemail can direct members to utilize the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline as an immediate clinical resource.

How to Utilize 988 in Your Practice:

- **Immediate Stabilization:** Instruct members in distress to call, text or chat 988 for 24/7, confidential support from behavioral health clinicians.
- **Mobile Crisis Connection:** If a higher level of care is needed, 988 can connect members directly to local mobile crisis response teams to intervene on-site.
- **Warm Handoffs:** Where applicable, provider clinical staff should coordinate with 988 to facilitate a warm handoff, ensuring no gap in care.

3. Required Documentation for NCQA Audits

To satisfy NCQA network adequacy and quality metric audits, every instance where 988 is used to fulfill the six-hour requirement must be documented in the member's medical record:

- Document the time the urgent appointment request was received.
- Note the inability to schedule within the six-hour threshold (if applicable).
- Record the time, date and name of the 988 counselor or Mobile Crisis Team referred to.
- Document the follow-up outpatient appointment scheduled within 24 to 48 hours.

4. Patient Education

Providers are expected to proactively share information about 988 with all members. Please ensure 988 is prominently displayed on your practice's after-hours answering service messaging and in your waiting areas.

As a reminder, for life-threatening emergencies, the instruction must be to call 911 or direct the patient to the nearest emergency room immediately.

Thank you for your continued partnership in ensuring our members have immediate access to life-saving behavioral health services.

Questions?
Please contact our Provider Relations team at **714-246-8600** or visit CalOptima Health's Provider Portal at providers.caloptima.org.