

School Mental Health Care Advocates Request \$25M For FY 22-23

A panel of mental health care professionals and school teachers are requesting funding for 100 more school-based mental health care centers for fiscal year 2022-23, more than [Governor Gretchen Whitmer](#) allocated in her budget recommendations.

During a press conference on Wednesday, Deb Brinson, interim executive director of the School-Community Health Alliance of Michigan and CEO of Honor Community Health, said the panel is asking the state to provide \$25 million – \$14 million more than the \$11 million in the budget recommendation – to establish 100 more centers across the state. Currently, there are 150 on a waitlist requesting at least one of these programs in their schools.

Centers cost roughly \$225,000-\$250,000 to operate a year and the services are open year-round. There are currently 200 school based mental health sites.

ESSER funds can be used, however the funds also are used to help schools recover from the pandemic which includes funding to replace outdated and often costly HVAC systems.

Ms. Brinson works at a community health center which operates six school-based health centers in Oakland County and said the situation is dire.

"Even before the pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of poor outcomes in young people. Up to one in five children three to 17 have had an emotional, mental health or behavioral disorder at some point in their life," Ms. Brinson said. "From 2009 to 2019, the share of high school students who reported persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness increased by 40 percent."

She also said suicide rates among those aged 10 to 24 increased by 57 percent in the country.

Jeff Cook, director of child and adolescent health at Beaumont Health, said the purpose of providing mental health based in or near schools is to break down the barriers of getting access to mental health. He said many students do not have the means to get to their appointments and families struggle with taking time off.

"Having these additional centers inside the schools will provide an opportunity for the students to receive needed health care services in the form of prevention, mental health, behavioral health and medical," Mr. Cook said. "They come down from their class, they receive the service and then they can get right back to school. The philosophy behind these health services is to provide those services inside the school where students spend the bulk of their time."

He added the mental health services provided for the past 30 years are evident these services work, but much more is needed.

While more populated areas in the state have mental health resources, rural communities continue suffer from a lack of access to health care for all residents. Natalie Kasiborski, special projects consultant for the Health Department of Northwest Michigan, said there is a professional shortage in many of the communities and the rural nature of those communities means barriers like lack of public transportation.

She said they have smaller districts where an entire school district might be the size of a school building in areas like the metro Detroit and Grand Rapids regions. They currently have one mental health therapist for a district of 500-600 students and are on the waitlist for a second provider.

"Onsite health centers and mental health support are available not just to students enrolled in school but also their family members up to age 21 as well, so they really wrap around the community," Ms. Kasiborski said of school-based mental health centers.

Kim Baron works as the director of health services in Grand Rapids Public Schools. They have three mental health sites and three school-based health centers. Echoing Mr. Cook's statements, she said students would often miss an entire morning of school for one appointment due to transportation barriers.

Ms. Baron also said mental health therapists help teachers by providing support and allowing educators to focus on teaching their students rather than acting as both a therapist and a teacher.

Oakridge Public Schools Superintendent Tom Livezey said they have 1,000 middle school and high school students who can receive dental, medical and behavioral health care by simply "walking down the hall." He empathizes with the 41 counties who do not have any school based centers, recalling prior to mental health care services students would have to travel 30 minutes to go to Mercy Health to receive care.

If Ms. Whtimer's budget recommendation remains at \$11 million to create 40 school-based mental health centers, Ms. Brinson said the already competitive process is sure to be even more competitive and would barely scratch the surface of the waitlist.

As for whether rural or urban communities would be priority over suburban areas, she also there is never really a balance. How the schools apply for the grants, how its written and how the data is presented are ultimately the deciding factors for a school to receive the necessary funding.

"That's the reason why we're on a mission to really make sure at least there is one school-based health center in every single county in the state," Ms. Brinson said.