



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND URBAN AFFAIRS

April 4, 2022

Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Councilmembers:

Re: DBH FY 2023 Budget – Invest More in School-Based Behavioral Health

The Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs is a member of the Strengthening Families Through Behavioral Health Coalition. The Strengthening Families Coalition brings together a diverse group of advocates who strive to ensure that DC has a fully integrated behavioral health care system in which all DC students, children, youth and families have timely access to high-quality, consistent, affordable and culturally responsive care that meets their needs and enables them to thrive. The Committee fully supports the Strengthening Families Coalition in urging the Council to allocate funding to establish a stable foundation for the School-Based Behavioral Health Expansion Program and ensure its future success.

Investing in the mental health and overall wellness of students is tantamount to investing in their academic progress. Many young people in the District have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that are proven to impact students' mental health and ability to learn.¹ This is particularly evident when considering the District's Black and Brown young people's experiences with racism, community violence, and police violence. According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, an alarming number of students reported having depressive symptoms and only one out of every four of those students reported receiving help.² Young people that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender reported significantly higher instances of suicidal ideations and/or attempts.³

¹ DC POLICY CENTER, STATE OF THE DC SCHOOLS REPORT 2019-2020 at 12, available at <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-dc-schools-19-20/>. (“Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, undermine a child’s sense of safety and stability. They include abuse, neglect, exposure to violence at home or in the community, substance misuse, and instability due to parental separation. They also include social factors such as economic hardship, homelessness, and discrimination. Decades of research link ACEs to lifelong negative health and social outcomes.”); How Trauma Impacts School Performance, available at <https://mhanational.org/how-trauma-impacts-school-performance>.

² OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION (OSSE), DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY 2019, <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2019%20DC%20YRBS%20Report.pdf>.

³ *Id.*

Far too many students' mental health and emotional needs were unmet prior to the pandemic and living through a pandemic has only exacerbated those needs. Over the past two years, many students experienced increased social isolation, anxiety, and depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ In the U.S., 203,649 children under the age of 18 lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19.⁵ In D.C., Black children suffered caregiver loss at 11 times the rate of their white peers, while Hispanic children suffered caregiver loss at a rate 17 times the rate of their white peers.⁶ The effects of the pandemic on students' mental well-being will continue to surface and may do so for years to come, further underscoring the need for a long-term commitment to investing in students' mental health.⁷

The Department of Behavioral Health's (DBH) School-Based Behavioral Health (SBBH) Expansion Program was created to address these unmet mental health needs of young people in the district and is now in its fourth year. The goal of the SBBH program is to partner with Community-Based Organizations (CBO) to place clinicians in every D.C. public school, including charter schools, to address a range of mental health needs from prevention and intervention to intensive supports and treatment. Currently, approximately 128 out of 251 D.C. schools have CBO clinicians in the school and many have begun providing services.⁸ This is an important step in the right direction, but continued investment in the SBBH program is necessary for its future success.

We acknowledge that the Mayor's FY2023 budget proposal provides for additional funding for the SBBH Program. However, the Mayor's budget decreases the amount of grant funding for CBOs from \$80,000 to \$70,000 per clinician, which will make it impossible for some CBOs to maintain the clinicians they already have in schools. DBH and the CBO providers should not be expected to provide more services with less money than they received in prior years. Ensuring that these grants remain at \$80,000 will stabilize the clinicians that are currently in schools and enable CBOs to recruit and hire clinicians for schools that still have vacant positions allowing young people to receive the services that they need.

Additionally, it is important that appropriate investments be made to support the longevity of the SBBH program. The CBO grant amount was originally set in 2016, which was before the implementation of the SBBH program and had not been adjusted for inflation. Furthermore, the CBO grants are currently one-time grants to supplement DBH funding that will have to be made every year. This comes at a time where there is increased demand for mental health services and a shortage of providers. Because of this

⁴ See DC POLICY CENTER, STATE OF THE DC SCHOOLS REPORT 2019-2020, *supra*; DC POLICY CENTER, STATE OF THE DC SCHOOLS REPORT 2020-2021, available at <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2020-21-State-of-DC-Schools-pages-format.pdf>.

⁵ SOCIAL POLICY ANALYTICS, ET AL., HIDDEN PAIN: CHILDREN WHO LOST A PARENT TO COVID-19 AND WHAT THE NATION CAN DO TO HELP, (December 2021), <https://www.covidcollaborative.us/assets/uploads/img/HIDDEN-PAIN-FINAL.pdf>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ See DC POLICY CENTER, STATE OF THE DC SCHOOLS REPORT 2020-2021.

⁸ See Updated CBO and DBH Clinicians Masterlist 3.9.2022, available at <https://dbh.dc.gov/node/1500291>.

a cost-study is essential to determine a dollar amount needed to maintain the SBBH program guaranteeing young people continued access to mental health services and creating a successful long lasting program.

Therefore, we urge the Council to:

- Allocate \$2.4 million in additional recurring local dollars for the School-Based Behavioral Health Expansion Program to stabilize CBO grant funding (amounts to \$80,000 per clinician). For the past two years, DC has provided adjustments to address the financial strains of the pandemic on providers. These supplements should be made permanent restoring the CBO grant funding, and enabling sustainability of the program.
- Commit \$300,000 in one-time local dollars to fund a cost-study to right-size the grant amounts for participating CBOs. While waiting for the results of the cost-study to determine the actual cost of sustaining the program, the CBO grant amount should cover inflationary cost increases over the next three years.

For the above-mentioned reasons, we strongly urge the D.C. Council to make these budget adjustments in solidarity with the Strengthening Families Through Behavioral Health Coalition.

Sincerely,



Marja K. Plater
John E. Nolan Youth Justice Counsel