

An Act establishing the Office of Mental Health Promotion S.1275 (Senator Cyr)



What problem does this bill address?

It is still hard for many children and their families in the Commonwealth to access the behavioral healthcare they need. Lack of coordination across state agencies results in health care siloes unable to address the intersecting issues that families face.

These issues have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the strains it has put on the children's behavioral health system. Families may not know where to turn for safe and effective treatments or who to talk to for their concerns. Promoting behavioral health wellness in the Commonwealth is further hampered by historical racism and the additional barriers to care that Black and brown families face. Massachusetts needs a coordinating body to address the behavioral health needs of children and families and facilitate cross-agency collaboration.

What difference will this bill make?

This bill establishes an Office of Behavioral Health Promotion within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services. The office will coordinate all activities in the Commonwealth to promote behavioral health wellness of all residents. The office will set goals for promotion and prevention of mental health conditions. The office will also facilitate the development of interagency initiatives informed by the science of promotion and prevention, advance health equity and trauma-informed care, and address the social determinants of health.

The office will prepare an annual report to evaluate its progress and the overall progress of the Commonwealth, toward the goal of promoting behavioral wellness, and addressing behavioral health conditions.

With a focus on equity:

Underlying inequities in social determinants of health have led to higher rates of COVID-19 infection and hospitalization and disparities in the prevalence of anxiety, depression, trauma-related disorders and substance use among Commonwealth residents of color. However, communities of color are also less than half as likely as white communities to receive mental health care.¹ This bill seeks to break down long-standing barriers to care by addressing health equity and trauma and facilitating collaboration between state agencies to promote behavioral health wellness for everyone.

Why is this bill needed now?

The pandemic has had a profound impact on the behavioral health of children and youth. CDC recently found that almost 75% of people aged 18-24 reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health symptom as a result of the pandemic.¹ The pandemic is also predicted to exacerbate existing mental health problems for children and youth. By establishing an Office Behavioral Health Promotion, the Commonwealth better prepares itself to support the behavioral health needs of its citizens throughout the pandemic and well after.