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Pritzker Administration Launches Effort to Strengthen Children’s Mental Health Care

IDPH, HFS and DHS Team up with UIC and American Academy of Pediatrics to Provide More Resources to Pediatricians and other Care Providers

CHICAGO – The Administration of Governor JB Pritzker announced today it is launching a new state program designed to help pediatricians and other providers meet children’s mental health needs by strengthening mental health services in emergency departments and schools. The new program will focus on increasing the volume of consultation services provided across the state, providing a multitude of mental health education and training opportunities to physicians and health care professionals, and strengthening the network of mental health resources and referrals accessible to providers and their patients. It will also explore the feasibility of direct provider-patient telehealth service programs.

The \$2.5 million federally funded program is a partnership involving the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), the Department of Healthcare and Family Services (HFS), the Department of Human Services (DHS) plus the University of Illinois Chicago’s (UIC) DocAssist Program and the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (ICAAP).

“The last few years have been challenging for all of us and this is especially true for our children,” said **Governor Pritzker**. “With these new dedicated resources, Illinois will better identify children who are suffering through mental health challenges and ensure they receive treatment and therapies that work while also addressing disparities in access to mental health treatment.”

"Our children deserve the resources that will help them develop into happy, healthy adults, which includes access to mental health services for those struggling," said **Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton**. "An African greeting asks, 'Are the children well?' We know that when our children are well, our communities are strong, and our future is bright. Illinois is committed to ensuring the children are well by initiating collaborative programs across agencies to strengthen health services, schools, and overall support for children and families throughout our state."

“As a pediatrician, I have seen the unprecedented behavioral health challenges our children in Illinois have faced these past few years,” said **IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra**. “This trend

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was evident even before the emergence of COVID-19 and was exacerbated by the pandemic, which disrupted learning and relationships and increased isolation for countless children. This new program will allow providers to have more resources to address children's needs by improving mental health education and training opportunities. It will also provide more assistance to pediatric primary care providers, allowing them to consult virtually with pediatric mental health specialists."

The Illinois Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Expansion is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) through two programs authorized by Congress, the American Rescue Plan and the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.

"Expanding access to behavioral health services for children across Illinois is a top priority for HFS," **said HFS Director Theresa Eagleson.** "Taking care of our mental wellness is so important, which is why the Department has made significant investments in programs for behavioral health this year, including raising rates for behavioral health providers across the state to increase capacity for our customers. We are pleased that this initiative will dedicate additional resources to children's behavioral health needs through a successful program, and we will continue working to broaden access to vital mental health services for children."

"At DHS, we are pleased to be a partner on the state's effort to increase mental health and wellness supports for young people. It is our shared priority to ensure that every opportunity and resource is maximized to this end, and we appreciate that pediatricians and other providers are stepping up – yet again – to meet the needs of Illinois' young people," **said Grace B. Hou, DHS Secretary.**

"This partnership will meaningfully improve the mental well-being of children in Illinois," **said Dr. David Albert, Director of the DHS Division of Mental Health.** "Mental healthcare is healthcare – and by providing mental health consultations to a wide range of healthcare providers, children requiring a mental health intervention will be much more likely to have their treatment needs met."

"Early touchpoints with pediatricians are key opportunities to identify mental health needs and the services and supports that can address them, before problems become harder to manage," **said Dana Weiner, PhD., Director of the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative** that was launched by Governor Pritzker in March of this year. "This effort supports the larger goals of the Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative by equipping pediatricians with the tools and information they need to provide timely and responsive detection and referral of child mental health service needs, which is one of the strategies that will help us to overcome the children's mental health crisis."

UIC's DocAssist program is a free statewide psychiatric consultation service for primary care providers who need assistance screening, diagnosing, and treating the mental health and substance use problems of children, adolescents, and perinatal women. The program is run by the UIC College of Pharmacy through an interagency agreement with the UIC Office of Medicaid Innovation and HFS. It is staffed by UIC's Department of Psychiatry's child psychiatrists, social workers, and administrative assistants and aims to assist primary care providers diagnose and treat mental health issues in children.



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"This project is an important step in addressing the mental health crisis for youth in Illinois," said **UIC Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and Illinois DocAssist Medical Director Diane M. Misch, MD, FAPA**. "The Illinois DocAssist program was created to address disparities in mental health treatment of vulnerable populations in Illinois and this partnership helps to enhance our ability to bridge the gap between primary and specialty mental health care. We estimate that with the launch of the partnership, pediatric mental health consultations are projected to grow by more than 40% and we expect to see improved outcomes for at-risk youth across race, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and socio-economic status."

"ICAAP is excited to partner with IDPH, HFS and DHS to develop and expand this needed support for pediatricians and family physicians," said **Mary Dobbins, MD, FAAP, a past president of ICAAP**. "These new investments will give pediatricians, family physicians, and others the tools they need to provide care and support for children, adolescents, and families in their practice."

The program will support a range of pediatric primary care providers, including pediatricians, family medicine physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants. With funding from the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the program also can now support school-based health providers and emergency department providers who often are on the frontlines when children are in need.

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