



Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Inc.

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Overwhelming Majority of Kansans Support Increased Investment in Mental Health System

Topeka—A recent public opinion poll shows that an overwhelming majority of Kansans support increasing the State’s support of mental health services.

In August, the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas (ACMHCK) commissioned a public opinion poll of likely Kansas voters, conducted by the Remington Research Group. The results are clear. Kansans overwhelmingly support increased investment in mental health:

- 76% think we should continue to increase investments in mental health services
- 67% believe the Kansas Legislature should take action to address mental health issues

“This poll validates what we have known for many years, which is that people in communities across our great state increasingly value mental health treatment and services as part of their health care service array,” said Kyle Kessler, Executive Director of the ACMHCK.

The Kansas Mental Health Reform Act of 1990 was designed to shift the focus from serving individuals in state psychiatric hospitals to ensuring access to timely, effective treatment in the community and designated Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) as the local Mental Health Authorities. The estimate used for the number of persons treated by CMHCs at that time was 80,000. By 2018, CMHCs were providing treatment to over 140,000 Kansans. It is further estimated that 220,000 adults in Kansas experience serious psychological distress, and 24 percent of people with serious psychological distress have an unmet need of mental health treatment according to a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Study.

Despite the need, funding for community mental health has not kept pace with the demand. For over a decade beginning in 2006, funding for CMHCs either was reduced or remained stagnant until the Legislature began helping to restore funding in 2017.

Recognizing that the behavioral health system in Kansas has reached a crisis point after years of underfunding and capacity issues, the Kansas Legislature authorized the Kansas Mental Health Task Force to review system gaps and issues in 2017 and 2018. The Task Force found that “for behavioral health systems to operate effectively, they need adequate capacity . . . Capacity issues or barriers to behavioral health services significantly harm patient, societal, and system-level outcomes.”

According to Kessler, who also served on the Task Force, “CMHCs in Kansas do an extraordinary job of supporting their communities and providing mental and behavioral health services to individuals in need. By state law, they are mandated to serve all individuals, regardless of their ability to pay. However, reductions in state funding, workforce shortages, and increased demand for services have put an incredible strain on the system.”

“In 2017, the Kansas Legislature began restoring some of the budget reductions made over the past decade. We deeply appreciate this vital support, but more is needed to ensure we are able to effectively meet the needs of individuals in crisis or who are experiencing mental illness,” said Greg Hennen, Executive Director of Four County Mental Health in Southeast Kansas and President of the ACMHCK. He added, “over the last several years, we have seen tragic increases in suicide rates across all age groups and especially among youth and young adults as well as reductions in access to inpatient services, and a growing need for crisis services provided in the community. In order to meet the promise of Mental Health reform and the needs of today, we must fully fund the mental health system.”

We look forward to working with the Governor, the Kansas Legislature, and the Department for Aging and Disability Services to develop a comprehensive plan to support the Kansas mental health system.

Full poll results will be available at www.acmhck.org.

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In Kansas, Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) provide behavioral health services in all 105 counties, 24-hours a day, seven days a week. CMHCs are the local Mental Health Authorities coordinating the delivery of publicly funded community-based mental health services and are required to provide services to all Kansans needing them, regardless of their ability to pay. This makes the community mental health system the safety net for Kansans with behavioral health needs.