

Why SAMHSA's Mental Health Block Grant Must Include Early Intervention and Prevention

CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy

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Background

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) manages two major block grant programs, the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant (MHBG) and the Substance Use Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Services Block Grant (SUBG). Both grants provide states with essential dollars to fund key mental and behavioral health programs and interventions. Federal statute requires that at least 20% of SUBG funding is set aside for primary prevention strategies including education, information dissemination, alternatives to substances, problem identification and referral, community-based processes, and community agreements. In contrast, the MHBG does not have a similar requirement to fund prevention and early intervention. In fact, as currently authorized, the MHBG can be used only for adults with serious mental illness (SMI) or children with serious emotional disturbance (SED), which limits its use to individuals with very high needs, and effectively prohibits funds from being used for early intervention and prevention.

Mental Health in the Nation

According to the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 22.8 percent (58.7 million people) of people age 18 and up experienced a mental health challenge in the prior year. Without adequate programming on the community and system level, along with mental health screening, the number of people experiencing mental health concerns could continue to increase.

Growing Rates of Young People Experience Poor Mental Health Conditions

Adverse mental health conditions are highly prevalent among children and youth. According to the 2023 CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 39.7% of students in grades 9-12 felt persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, 28.5% experienced poor mental health, 20.4% seriously considered attempting suicide, and 9.5% attempted suicide.

How a Focus on Prevention and Early Intervention Can Curb Rates of Mental Health Conditions

There are a number of prevention programs that the Mental Health Block Grant could help support. These include:

- Screening and Early Treatment
- Support For Pregnant and Postpartum Individuals
- Integrated Care
- School-based Mental Health
- Peer Support

Preventive programs can serve and support many Americans, beyond those individuals with a diagnosis, and are particularly important for children, youth, and young adults. Early interventions like screening for mental and behavioral health conditions can be an excellent way to intervene and treat conditions early, before they become more severe. This can help curb rates of depression, anxiety, and mood disorders in the U.S., which increased during the pandemic and remain high.

Several Healthy People 2030 goals include prevention and early intervention strategies like screening, school-based preventive mental health care, and expanding the behavioral health workforce. To meet these goals and the public's concerns, Congress must ensure that SAMHSA's MHBG can be used for prevention and early intervention services. The most effective option is a mandatory set-aside for prevention and early intervention to ensure that all states use a portion of their MHBG funds to support key services and upstream interventions. Including prevention and early intervention in the MHBG is a fix that involves no additional dollars but can be life saving for many.

What you can do:

- Co-sponsor and pass the Early Action and Responsiveness Lifts Youth (EARLY) Minds Act (H.R. 1735/S. 779), introduced by Representatives August Pfluger (TX-11), John Joyce (PA-13), Kathy Castor (FL-14), and Kim Schrier (WA-08) along with Senators Padilla (CA), Tillis (NC), Murkowski (AK), and Kaine (VA).