



Mental Health Working Group

2024 Meeting Summary

The Alliance for Patient Access hosted the Mental Health Working Group's annual meeting on June 21-22, 2024, in San Diego, California. Clinicians, advocates and stakeholders from across the country convened to discuss the mental health care landscape and treatment access for patients with mental health conditions.

Utilization Management

Utilization management poses a serious burden for patients with mental health conditions, especially those with serious mental illness. Meeting participants explained that these tactics can delay care and lead to a deterioration in the patient-provider relationship.

Prior Authorization

One of the greatest challenges that mental health providers face is prior authorization. Working group members explained that for many people living with mental health conditions, finally coming to see a provider is already crossing a great hurdle. But prior authorization can create more barriers. Patients must wait even longer before their medication is approved, and they are often susceptible to non-adherence during these windows. Timely care is critical for patients with serious mental illnesses, and prior authorization delays can be detrimental.

Step Therapy

Meeting participants also highlighted that step therapy is a serious hindrance while treating patients. In many cases, patients are forced to try and fail medications that they've already been on. Working group members pointed out that failure for patients with a serious mental illness can lead to catastrophic consequences for themselves and their families. Extra steps place a serious burden on both patients and providers.

Non-Medical Switching

Another utilization management tactic that working group members discussed was non-medical switching. In some cases, patients with mental health conditions may be switched from one treatment to another based on a health plan's preferred formulary.

But meeting participants discussed how one treatment can't simply be swapped for another in most cases. A non-medical switch can severely harm a patient's stability. Many patients with mental health concerns may also be put off by receiving a new treatment, which can harm their relationship with their provider or lead to non-adherence.



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Pharmacy Benefit Managers

Meeting participants expressed frustrations over the role of pharmacy benefit managers as “middlemen.” These organizations negotiate formularies for insurance companies. Pharmacy benefit managers make decisions on what should be covered based on their own profit rather than patients’ access. Participants discussed how these entities are largely responsible for setting up utilization management barriers.

The Value of Adherence

One of the most important parts of treating a mental health condition is adherence. Participants highlighted that patients need to find the right treatment and adhere to it to achieve stability. Patients who adhere to the right treatment are less likely to need emergency services and more likely to have their condition under control.

One innovative tool to promote adherence is long-acting injectables. These treatments are designed to be delivered at intervals upward of three months. Patients don’t have to worry about taking a daily oral medication, and the treatment is long lasting. These treatments reduce the burden of implementing treatment for patients, and they also address the risk of potentially forgetting a medication.

Mental Health Parity

Parity was another important topic for working group members. The pandemic brought the need for better mental health services to the forefront of the public’s attention. But while steps have been taken to improve access and care, meeting participants stressed that there is still work to be done.

Parity between mental and physical health has come to policymakers’ attention, but providers often don’t experience parity despite federal improvement efforts. While equal reimbursement is the expected policy,

many providers feel that it is still not fully implemented. Similarly, onerous utilization management tactics and cost-sharing requirements may disproportionately impact patients living with mental health conditions. Policymakers must find ways to ensure that parity is effectively implemented. The guarantee of appropriate reimbursement will help many providers as they continue to offer and expand mental health care services.

Holistic Mental Health Care

Meeting participants also discussed the need for holistic care when treating patients with mental health conditions. Care must treat the entirety of the patient, including physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social health.

Meeting participants highlighted postpartum depression as a prime example of the need for holistic health. Mothers with postpartum depression often need mental health care, but they may also need physical care. Optimal care for these mothers isn’t restricted to just mental health care. It should treat the entire patient.

What’s Next?

Working group members identified advocacy opportunities and discussed plans for educational materials to promote patient-centered care for mental health patients.

To learn more about AfPA’s Mental Health Working Group, contact Casey McPherson at cmcpherson@allianceforpatientaccess.org.



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