



Mental Health Working Group

2025 MEETING SUMMARY

The Alliance for Patient Access convened the Mental Health Working Group on July 25-26, 2025 to examine systemic and emerging issues in mental health care. Clinicians shared their experiences with policy challenges, workforce limitations and changes to treatment delivery.

UTILIZATION MANAGEMENT

Prior Authorization

Clinicians described prior authorization as one of the most persistent and disruptive barriers to timely treatment. While historically used to control costs for high-priced drugs, prior authorization now applies to nearly all medications – including generics and first-line treatments – forcing providers to navigate layers of paperwork and prolonged approval times.

One psychiatrist said, “The first SSRI treatment for depression that was approved in 1987 now requires a prior authorization.”

Step Therapy

Meeting participants expressed frustration with step therapy practices because medications for mental health conditions can impact people, even those with the same diagnosis, with varying effectiveness and side effects. This practice can put a patient’s well-being at risk, potentially worsening symptoms and overriding shared treatment decisions.

Non-medical Switching

Non-medical switching, a practice in which an insurer changes a stable patient’s medication for reasons unrelated to their health, remains a widespread issue.

Non-medical changes to a patient’s medication can seriously disrupt their stability. Clinicians noted that one treatment cannot simply be replaced with another.

For many people managing mental health conditions, being switched to a new treatment can also cause frustration or discomfort, potentially straining the patient-clinician relationship or resulting in treatment non-adherence.





ACCESS TO SPECIALISTS

Participants emphasized that insurance coverage does not guarantee access to mental health services. Narrow provider networks, coupled with high out-of-network costs, often leave patients with few affordable options. In many cases, patients either delay care or forgo treatment altogether.

Clinicians expressed concern that inadequate coverage undermines parity laws and leaves vulnerable patients without needed support.

CLINICIAN SHORTAGE

The national shortage of mental health professionals remains a crisis. Demand for care has surged in recent years, especially among teens and young adults. Yet waitlists in many areas extend months, even for urgent cases. This bottleneck can exacerbate symptoms of serious mental illness.

One psychiatrist said, “If I were younger and really desperate to see somebody, I can’t imagine what I’d do.”

MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING

Routine mental health screenings can help identify at-risk individuals earlier. However, clinicians stressed that screenings are not diagnostic tools and must be paired with timely interventions. Without adequate follow-up, screenings can lead to frustration, hopelessness or unnecessary stigma.

MENTAL HEALTH PARITY

Clinicians unanimously agreed that, despite federal and state mental health parity laws, implementation is inconsistent. Patients often face higher copays, stricter visit limits and more frequent administrative hurdles for mental health services than for physical health care. Clinicians emphasized that, until parity laws are uniformly implemented, disparities in access, affordability and quality of care will persist.

AI AND MENTAL HEALTH

Participants discussed both opportunities and risks that come with the growing availability of AI-driven mental health apps. While these tools can expand reach and offer immediate engagement, they lack the nuance, discernment and interpersonal skills provided by trained clinicians. AI tools may misinterpret symptoms, reinforce bias or fail to recognize warning signs of crisis.

Clinicians expressed ethical concerns regarding patient privacy, data security and the potential for overreliance on technology in lieu of professional care. Ensuring appropriate use of AI will be critical going forward.

NEXT STEPS

Meeting participants were enthusiastic about the opportunity to increase awareness about policy issues in mental health and lend their voice to patient advocacy. Participants offered ideas for new educational resources and expressed interest in legislative engagement.

GET INVOLVED

To learn more about AfPA’s Mental Health Working Group, visit
AllianceForPatientAccess.Org
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