



For Immediate Release

April 9, 2021

FLORIDA MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE PROVIDERS URGE LAWMAKERS TO RESTORE CRUCIAL FUNDING IN STATE BUDGET

Proposed cuts over \$60 million hurt Floridians facing challenges worsened by pandemic

TALLAHASSEE, FL, April 9, 2021 – The Florida Behavioral Health Association (FBHA) today urged lawmakers to restore proposed state budget reductions of more than \$60 million to community mental health and substance use providers who are already grappling with a surge in mental health trauma, opioid usage and suicides faced by Floridians struggling with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Florida has seen a significant increase in people of all ages and backgrounds who are suffering from mental health and substance use disorders,” said Melanie Brown-Woofter, President and CEO of FBHA. “The life-saving services our members provide are crucial to keeping Florida’s most vulnerable people safe.”

While recognizing the difficult pressures that legislators are under due to the pandemic and its unprecedented economic impact, FBHA urged state lawmakers to not cut programs that are a lifeline to so many Floridians.

FBHA providers have become integral to the communities where they operate. Several programs offer 24/7 services and provide immediate access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment services for anyone in need, taking enormous pressure off law enforcement agencies, county jails and hospital emergency departments.

The proposed cuts would directly impact life-saving services and programs operated by dozens of community-based mental health and substance use providers statewide. The cuts would impact general revenue funding for Community Substance Use and Mental Health Services, a variety of Community-based Behavioral Health Treatment Teams, and Central Receiving Systems, which offer immediate crisis support to individuals.

Doug Leonardo, senior vice president of Chrysalis Health and chair of the Florida Behavioral Health Association Board, said that the community-based treatment organizations feel the proposed cuts would negatively impact those they serve by decreasing access to critical mental health and substance use disorder services. He also said that patients continue to share their personal belief that the services and support they have received from these providers have been lifesaving.

For example, Peter, who received counseling at Chrysalis Health due to his abusive behavior, said that prior to the help he received, he had been numb for 20 years. He shared that in part of Chrysalis’s

productive work, he is going back to college at age 62 to become an activist for ethical and corporate reform. “I no longer drink. I no longer self-medicate. I now believe if we can understand what affects us negatively, we can heal,” Peter said. “Chrysalis is a guiding light in my life, and I will forever be grateful.”

Maureen Dunleavy, regional vice president of Guidance/Care Center- WestCare, a FBHA member and provider in Key West, said the cuts would result in fewer mental health and substance use services provided at Monroe County’s central receiving facility. Monroe County has the highest suicide rate in Florida and opioid overdoses in the county are on the rise, Dunleavy noted.

The pandemic’s impact on Floridians’ well-being is documented by some grim statistics, Brown-Woofter said. During 2020, 67 percent of FBHA’s community behavioral health providers reported an increase in crisis calls over the prior year, non-fatal opioid overdoses rose by 40 percent and suicide deaths increased in 22 of Florida’s 67 counties over 2019.

“We’re hopeful that when legislative leaders hear and carefully weight these frightening statistics and the positive impact of these mental health and substance use providers on vulnerable Floridians, that they will restore state funding to current levels,” Brown-Woofter said. “FBHA and its members believe if Senate and House budget negotiators work together, we can restore funding. We are committed to working closely with legislative leaders as the budget negotiations unfold.”

###

The Florida Behavioral Health Association is a non-profit organization that provides statewide leadership on behavioral health policy and practice. FBHA supports member agencies offering services to those in need of mental health and substance use disorder assistance and support. Its members include a broad range of provider types, ranging from small specialty organizations to comprehensive treatment organizations with multiple locations within a geographic region. For more information, please visit www.floridabha.org.