

June 5, 2023

The Honorable Henry D. McMaster  
Governor of South Carolina  
South Carolina Statehouse, First Floor  
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Dear Governor McMaster,

In January 2022, at your direction, the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (SCDHHS) performed a comprehensive review and analysis of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health's (DMH) school mental health services program. On May 3, 2022, SCDHHS announced the [results of this comprehensive review](#) and [made seven recommendations](#) to improve access to mental health services in South Carolina's public schools. In support of these recommendations, SCDHHS enacted policy changes beginning July 1, 2022, designed to remove barriers that prevented children from accessing the mental health services they need.

Today, I am pleased to report significant progress in improving the number of mental health counselors providing services in South Carolina's schools. According to January 2023 survey data, 995 mental health counselors were available to provide services in the school setting compared to approximately 600 in January 2022, an increase of 65.8%. This improvement is a testament to the collaborative approach we have developed with the school districts, DMH and the private sector and the increased reimbursement rates we have enacted for these services with your support and the support of the South Carolina General Assembly. With the increase in counselors, South Carolina's mental health counselor to student ratio has improved from 1:1,300 in Spring 2022 to 1:829 students in January 2023.

I have enclosed a summary of the survey results and the actions we have taken over the last year to provide South Carolina school districts with greater choice in how they are able to meet the mental health needs of their students. While we are proud of the progress we are reporting today, our goal remains to further improve the mental health counselor to student ratio to 1:650 students later this year with a long-term goal of achieving a ratio of 1:325. We look forward to continuing our work to improve access to these vital services in concert with our other initiatives designed to improve coordination and continuity of care throughout the state's health care delivery system.

Thank you for your continued attention to this mental health crisis and dedication to ensuring our children have access to mental health services and safe and productive learning environments.

Sincerely,



Robert M. Kerr

## School-based Mental Health Services June 2023 Update

### Overview

On May 3, 2022, the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (SCDHHS) announced the results of its comprehensive review of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health's (DMH) school mental health services program and seven recommendations to improve access to mental health services in South Carolina schools. The review was conducted by SCDHHS' Bureau of Program Integrity and Internal Audit and included several key findings that prompted the agency to make seven recommendations it believed would remove barriers that previously existed to providing access to quality mental health services in South Carolina's schools. Through the implementation of its recommendations, SCDHHS established a short-term goal of reducing the counselor-to-student ratio in South Carolina's schools from 1:1,300 to 1:650 (effectively the equivalent of providing access to a mental health counselor in each school in the state) by 2023. A summary of the key findings, SCDHHS actions specific to its May 2022 recommendations and updated South Carolina school mental health services data are available below.

### Summary of 2022 Key Findings

- The mental health counselor-to-student ratio was approximately 1:1,300.
- There were approximately 600 mental health counselors providing services in schools, of which approximately 60% were employed by DMH.
- Given the choice, 59% of school districts would prefer employing their own counselor rather than contract with DMH.
- SCDHHS had a differential rate schedule that paid DMH counselors, who are typically not licensed, more than double what district employed counselors were reimbursed for a 30-min. individual therapy session.

### Summary of SCDHHS Actions

- Effective July 1, 2022, SCDHHS enacted policy changes to give school districts greater flexibility in hiring their own counselor or contracting with a private counselor. School districts are also able to continue to receive services through DMH and may use a combination of the three delivery methods listed above.
- Effective July 1, 2022, SCDHHS raised its counseling rates and placed an emphasis on paying licensed clinicians at a higher rate than unlicensed clinicians. The new rate is available for any licensed clinician, including those employed by a school district and private providers who are contracted with a school district. For a 30-min. individual therapy session, the rate for licensed clinicians who were not employed by DMH was increased from \$37 to \$71.31.
- On Sept. 28, 2022, SCDHHS announced a partnership with the University of South Carolina's Department of Psychology to help schools integrate mental health services into their operations.
- In January 2023, SCDHHS partnered with the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE) to survey school districts to update school mental health services program data.

### **January 2023 School Mental Health Services Data**

- As of January 2023, the mental health counselor-to-student ratio is approximately 1:829.
  - 2022 data showed a ratio of 1:1,300.
- As of January 2023, students at approximately 80% of schools have access to a mental health counselor.
  - This data shows students at 118 more schools had access to mental health counseling during January 2023 than they did during the 2021-2022 school year.
- As of January 2023, the number of school-based counselors rose from approximately 600 to nearly 1,000 (995).
  - 2022 review found approximately 600 counselors available through schools, approx. 60% were DMH-employed.
- As of January 2023, more counselors were employed by school districts than DMH.
  - 46.7% of counselors are now employed by a district, 33.5% by DMH and 19.7% are private providers.
  - In 2022, 60% of school-based counselors were employed by DMH.
  - This trend correlates with 2022 survey data indicating 59% of school districts would prefer to employ a counselor(s) to contracting with DMH for mental health services.
- The number of districts where 100% of schools had access to mental health counseling increased from 35 in 2022 to 42 in January 2023. There were 76 South Carolina school districts surveyed.
- Nine districts now have access to mental health counseling services that did not have any access during the 2022 school year. Only one district, Union, reported it did not have access to mental health services in any schools.

### **Key Youth Behavioral Health Statistics**

- In 2021, national data indicates 30% of female high school students seriously considered suicide, an increase from 24.1% in 2019.
- In 2021, national data indicates 13.3% of female high school students attempted suicide, an increase from 11% in 2019.
- During the first week of the 2022-2023 school year, the Medical University of South Carolina reported treating six children per day in its pediatric emergency department for behavioral health needs.
- Approximately 70% of youth in South Carolina with a major depressive episode do not receive mental health services.
- Children are 21 times more likely to access mental health services in schools than in any other setting.
- High school students with depression are more than twice as likely to drop out than their peers.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death for South Carolinians between ages 10-14.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for South Carolinians between ages 15-17.