



2026 STATE ROUNDTABLE REPORT: **MENTAL HEALTH**



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“Anyone who does anything to help a child in his life is a hero.”

~ Fred Rogers

2026 Mental Health Report to the State Roundtable

The Centers for Disease Control reports that the United States is in a mental health crisis. This mental health crisis has especially impacted young people. Since COVID-19, this crisis for youth has increased, with suicide and drug overdose being among the leading causes of death.

Mental health and physical health are essential to living a healthy life. Living with a mental illness can be challenging for individuals as they go about their day-to-day life. Experiencing unresolved mental health issues can often lead to negative impacts on an individual’s health, finances, relationships, and community. Accessing services earlier, building connections, and engaging in activities can all help to improve well-being and make a positive impact on an individual’s life.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports that in 2025, more than 1 in 7 youth, ages 6-17, in the United States experienced a mental health disorder. Of those youth, 50.6% receive mental health treatment. Accessing services continues to be challenging due to a variety of reasons, such as a lack of mental health professionals, a lack of provider options, the complexity of mental health issues, and waitlists associated with these challenges. As such, mental health has remained a concern for adults and children across the country. Pennsylvania has focused efforts to improve the impact of mental health on children and families, specifically within the dependency system.

Background

During the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 Leadership Roundtable meeting discussions, it became clear that mental health was impacting children and parents in the dependency system. As such, the following areas of concern were taken to the 2023 State Roundtable (SRT):

- Need to understand Pennsylvania’s Mental Health System better;
- Need for better access to mental health services and treatment;
- Waiting lists for mental health services and treatment;
- Lack of professionals available to provide specialized treatment;
- Lack of available treatment and placement options for complex mental health cases;
- Difficulty with cross-system collaboration; and
- Lack of adequate preventative interventions.

In 2023, the SRT convened the Mental Health Workgroup (MHWG). The Honorable Tina M. Boyd, Administrative Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Berks County, and Tanya Stauffer, Administrator of York County Children,

Youth, and Families, were selected as Workgroup Co-Chairpersons. Workgroup members were selected from rural and urban communities across the Commonwealth. Membership represented each Leadership Roundtable, Dependency Judges, Juvenile Court Hearing Officers, Attorneys, Children and Youth Administrators, Mental Health Professionals, and State Partners.

During the first year, the MHWG examined the impact of mental health on dependency courts, child welfare agencies, children, parents, the community, and the state. The MHWG was provided with education on a multitude of topics related to mental health, including:

- An Overview of Pennsylvania’s Mental Health System
- The Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP)
- Understanding Mental Health Evaluations
- Student Assistance Program (SAP)
- The Intersection between Mental Health and the Child Welfare and Dependency Systems
- Peer Support Programs
- The Department of Human Services Blueprint Report on Complex Cases

Members of the MHWG also conducted focus groups with parents with lived mental health experience. The feedback gathered from those focus groups included:

- A lack of knowledge and understanding regarding available mental health services
- Long waitlists for available services
- Being court-ordered to non-existent services
- Being court-ordered to have repeat services or evaluations, which delays treatment
- A lack of engagement by system professionals

At the 2024 Spring Leadership Roundtables (LRT), the MHWG surveyed LRT members to better understand the availability of mental health resources and services statewide. The survey and supporting documents can be found in the 2024 MHWG report to the SRT. <https://ocfcpacourts.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2024-Mental-Health-State-Roundtable-Report.pdf>

The MHWG concluded 2024 by identifying three areas of focus:

1. Education
2. Key questions for dependency professionals
3. Early identification and understanding

The MHWG also learned that CASSP Coordinators and SAP can be helpful resources for early identification and intervention.

At the end of the first year, the MHWG concluded with the following recommendations approved by the 2024 State Roundtable:

1. Provide statewide education to dependency court professionals in order to bring understanding and awareness of Pennsylvania's mental health system and its impact on children and parents in the dependency system;
2. Approve and distribute a Guide to Rightsized Mental Health Services;
3. Approve and distribute a Guide to Mental Health Practices and Programs;
4. Encourage Local Children's Roundtables to prioritize mental health as a topic of discussion and ensure county mental health representation;
5. Examine ways of gathering statewide mental health data; and
6. Continue to analyze and develop strategies to improve access to mental health services for dependent children and families.

During the second year, the 2024 MHWG report and resources were distributed at LRTs and educational sessions. During monthly meetings, the MHWG continued to educate itself on national and statewide best practices and programs. These programs included:

- "Give an Hour" Program
- SpeakUp! Program
- Strengthening Families Program (SFP)
- Positive Parenting Program
- High-Fidelity Wraparound Services
- Trust-Based Relational Intervention
- Creating a Trauma-Informed and Responsive Court & Video Discussion Guide

Several educational sessions surrounding mental health were provided across the state. Those sessions were as follows:

On July 25, 2024, during the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges' Dependency Luncheon, Judges were provided with an education session titled "A Judicial Understanding of Pennsylvania's Mental Health System."

On October 10, 2024, the Juvenile Court Hearing Officer Education Committee held an all-day educational session on mental health. Educational topics included:

- A Judicial Understanding of Pennsylvania's Mental Health System
- Mental Health Case Law Update
- State Roundtable MHWG Report and Resources
- Juvenile Court Hearing Officers Educational Committee Panel, Mental Health Scenarios
- Ethical Situations and Considerations, Mental Health Scenarios.

On October 29, 2024, during the AOPC's Behavioral Health Summit, MHWG members presented a session titled "Addressing the Impact of Mental Health on Children and Families."

As the MHWG focused on completing the 2024 Workgroup recommendations, members were assigned to one of four subcommittees:

1. Statewide Education for Dependency Professionals
2. Local Children's Roundtable (LCRT)
3. Statewide Mental Health Data
4. Family and Kin Support and Connections

Finally, the MHWG spent time gathering information to better understand the experiences of professionals and youth in the dependency system, addressing mental health challenges. This information gathering occurred through:

1. Youth Advisory Board Focus Group
2. Leadership Roundtable Surveys
3. Mental Health Administrator Collaboration

The 2025 State Roundtable approved the following recommendations:

1. Approve and distribute the *Local Children's Roundtable Guide: Strengthening the Availability and Delivery of Mental Health Services and Treatment for Children and Families in the Dependency System*;
2. Approve and distribute the *Mental Health Data Considerations* for counties;
3. Continue to provide statewide mental health education to child welfare and dependency court professionals;
4. Encourage Local Children's Roundtables to prioritize mental health and mental health professionals' participation at meetings;
5. Continue to analyze and develop strategies to improve mental health services and treatment for dependent children and their families; and
6. Identify a select number of counties to assess the effectiveness of the tools and recommendations developed by the MHWG.

Progress and Updates

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." – Ralph Waldo Emerson

Over the last year, the 2025 MHWG report and resources were distributed at LRTs and educational sessions. The MHWG continued to meet monthly to implement its recommendations approved by the 2025 SRT. The following sections reflect the past year's progress.

Workgroup Education

Over the last year, the MHWG continued to educate itself on the following topics:

An Overview of Behavioral Health Alliance of Rural Pennsylvania (BHARP)

Sally Walker, Chief Executive Director and Workgroup Member

- BHARP is a partner with the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHASAS) and Community Care Behavioral Health (Behavioral Health Managed Care Organization) to implement the Health Choices Contract
- BHARP is the Primary Contractor for the North Central Behavioral Health Choices
- Membership for 24 counties, six jointers, for both mental health and drug and alcohol services

Integrated Practice Team

Cecilia Keesey, Associate Director, Children's Home of York, and Aisha Sullivan, Program Coordinator, Children's Home of York

- Community-oriented, strengths-based, individualized planning process
- Reduces/prevents children from being removed from their homes
- Referrals come from York County Children, Youth, and Families and York County Schools
- Types of cases to be referred can include substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, and housing concerns

Pennsylvania's Blueprint Workgroup for Youth with Complex Needs

Jonathan McVey, Special Assistant for Complex Needs Planning, Office of the Secretary, Health and Human Services

- Developed blueprint recommendations released in February 2024

- The workgroup consists of Department of Human Services (DHS), child welfare and dependency stakeholders, mental health professionals, community providers, and individuals with lived experience
- The key component of the workgroup is systemic collaboration
- Current subcommittees include *Accept and Provide*, *Vacancy Busters*, and *One Family/One Story*
- Completed subcommittees included *It's Complicated* and *Family Teaming Collaborative*

PA Family Network, Charting the LifeCourse

Francine Hogan, Director

- A toolkit to help individuals establish goals for a successful life
- Focus on strengths and planning for the future
- Focus on the trajectory of the individual's life experiences
- Help individuals explore the life they want to live by looking into these areas: Daily Life & Employment, Community Living, Safety and Security, Healthy Living, Social and Spirituality, and Advocacy and Engagement
- Focuses on all individuals regardless of age or ability
- Helps to identify multiple types of support for the identified individual

Local School District Panel Discussion

The MHWG recognized that school districts play an essential role in upstreaming and early intervention. With that in mind, the MHWG invited a school representative from each LRT to virtually join a workgroup meeting to provide a better understanding of school districts' mental health challenges and interventions. Each school representative had direct knowledge of the mental health programs and the students who access those programs.

The panel of school representatives shared their districts' mental health gaps, including:

- Lack of communication between various systems
- Children with significant mental health concerns attending school without the necessary mental health interventions in place
- Lack of proper training for teachers to better understand how to help children with significant mental health challenges

The MHWG noted several themes that emerged from the conversation with school districts:

- School districts want to be at the table and want to communicate
- School districts are not properly trained to manage children experiencing mental health issues, as this is not their area of expertise

- School districts encourage family and kinship to be involved in supporting their educational success

Mental Health Education Provided to Court Professionals

On July 24, 2025, judges were provided with “***The Intersection Between the Juvenile Act and Act 65: Understanding Consent of an Adolescent to Mental Health Treatment***” during the Dependency Education Session at the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges.

The education session included:

Creating Communication Bridges in Dependency

*Honorable Kevin M. Dougherty, Justice
Pennsylvania Supreme Court*

State Roundtable’s Mental Health Workgroup Update

*Honorable Tina M. Boyd
Court of Common Pleas of Berks County*

Intersection of the Mental Health Procedures Act, Act 65 of 2020, and the Juvenile Act

*Honorable Jordan B. Yeager
Court of Common Pleas of Bucks County*

Mental Health Records in Dependency Cases

*Honorable George W. Wheeler, President Judge
Court of Common Pleas of Tioga County*

On October 9, 2025, an education session was provided for the Juvenile Court Hearing Officers.

The education session included:

State Roundtable Mental Health Workgroup Recommendations and Tools Overview

*Christy R. Stanek, Deputy Director
Office of Children and Families in the Courts*

*Diane R. Litzinger, Judicial Analyst
Office of Children and Families in the Courts*

Intersection of the Mental Health Procedures Act, Act 65 of 2020, and The Juvenile Act

*Honorable Jennifer L. Rogers
Family and Dependency Court
Court of Common Pleas of Luzerne County*

Mental Health Records in Dependency Cases
*Maria Gibbons, Esquire, Juvenile Court Hearing Officer
Court of Common Pleas of Montgomery County*

On April 23, 2026, during the Chief Justice Max Baer Children’s Summit, an education session titled **"From Silos to Solutions: Helping Children and Families Thrive"** was provided.

Presenters for this session included:

*Honorable Tina M. Boyd
Court of Common Pleas of Berks County*

*Tanya Stauffer, Administrator
York County Children, Youth, and Families*

*Honorable Linda R. Cordaro
Court of Common Pleas of Fayette County*

*Honorable Jordan B. Yeager
Court of Common Pleas of Bucks County*

*Honorable George W. Wheeler, President Judge
Court of Common Pleas of Tioga County*

This education session focused on outcomes from the four mental health test counties (Berks, Bucks, Fayette, and Tioga). Each judge shared their county’s accomplishments and takeaways from their participation in the test.

On May 8, 2026, **"The Intersection Between the Juvenile Act and Act 65: Understanding Consent of Adolescent Mental Health Treatment"** was provided virtually to Dependency Judges, Solicitors, Guardians *ad Litem*, Parent Attorneys, and Child Welfare Administrators.

The education session included:

State Roundtable’s Mental Health Workgroup Update
*Honorable Tina M. Boyd
Court of Common Pleas of Berks County*

*Tanya Stauffer, Administrator
York County Children, Youth, and Families*

Intersection of the Mental Health Procedures Act, Act 65 of 2020, and the Juvenile Act

*Honorable Jordan B. Yeager
Court of Common Pleas of Bucks County*

Mental Health Records in Dependency Cases

*Honorable George W. Wheeler, President Judge
Court of Common Pleas of Tioga County*

Overview of AOPC Behavioral Health Initiative

*Bobby Brier, Behavioral Health Administrator
Administrative Offices of Pennsylvania Courts*

Overview of Pennsylvania's S.R. Settlement

*Laval Miller Wilson, JD, Deputy Secretary
Office of Children, Youth and Families*

This education session mirrored the previous sessions provided to judges and JCHO's. At the conclusion of this session, all dependency court professionals had received education on mental health consent of minors.

Leadership Roundtable Surveys

Over the past few years, the MHWG gathered information from the LRTs on mental health practices and services to determine whether certain areas progressed during the MHWG's statewide efforts.

Key Survey Takeaways:

- County MH Directors' attendance at Local Children's Roundtable (LCRT) was 42% in 2024 and **increased to 73%** in 2026
- Managed Care Organization attendance at LCRT meetings was 21% in 2024 and **increased to 38%** in 2026
- Counties with a local dependency mental health initiative was 11% in 2024 and **increased to 24%** in 2026
- In 2026, **55%** of counties reported having a resource guide; however, they were not sure if the guide was updated or user-friendly

MHWG Recommendations and Tools Assessment Test

The vast majority of the work done over the past year included a focused assessment on the effectiveness of the MHWG's recommendations and tools, by testing them in four counties: Berks, Bucks, Fayette, and Tioga. Judges

from Berks, Bucks, and Tioga counties are members of the MHWG. In addition, the MHWG wanted to include a county that was not part of the Workgroup, as such, Fayette was selected as the fourth county.

The Test Counties agreed to the following:

- LCRT or LCRT subcommittee meetings, a minimum of every other month, that focus on MH
- Invite local mental health professionals to the meeting, County MH Director, Managed Care Organizations (MCOs), mental health providers
- Inclusion of OCFC staff support for LCRT
- Pre/Post Surveys to measure effectiveness of MHWG resources
- Utilizing MHWG recommendations and tools
- Cross-system education

Each county’s LCRT is unique in its mental health challenges and in its approach to collaboration. The test allowed each county to implement the resources and tools in a way that worked best for them. Below is a summary of highlights from each test county:

Berks County

The test assessment was conducted with a sub-committee of their LCRT. Berks County highlights included:

- Increased knowledge regarding the purpose of a mental health evaluation
- An understanding that a mental health intake and/or assessment can be utilized to start counseling, rather than waiting for an evaluation to be completed for such
- Case Management services can help families secure appropriate mental health treatment and services

Bucks County

The test assessment was conducted with their full LCRT. Bucks County highlights included:

- Having managed care providers become more actively involved in the LCRT
- LCRT members working together to condense and distribute a mental health resources guide
- An awareness of dependency attorneys' desire to better understand the availability and access of mental health services in order to advocate for their clients

Fayette County

The test assessment was conducted with their full LCRT. Fayette County highlights included:

- An understanding of the strengths/gaps with their county crisis intervention and response process
- MH and CYS collaboratively developed a one-page guide to MH, which was distributed at the attorney education session and to child welfare professionals

Tioga County

The test assessment was conducted with a subcommittee of their LCRT.

Tioga County highlights included:

- Development of a multiple-system process to bridge the gap surrounding mental health crisis situations for children involved in child welfare
- Reinstating cross-system education between CYS staff and MH staff

All four counties completed a questionnaire to assess their knowledge of local county mental health practice and services at the beginning and end of the testing process. The test counties' results showed an overall increase in knowledge of their county MH System and available MH services, as well as an increased understanding of the SRT MHWG.

Throughout the process, the counties recognized the importance of providing a focused, open forum to discuss mental health. Counties noted that having a trusted, neutral facilitator to initiate, guide, and move discussions along was key to bringing systems together. Each county reported the importance of having key stakeholders at the table, such as Mental Health Directors, Managed Care Providers, School Districts, and Attorneys.

Various county participants anonymously shared the following comments:

- The process helped MH and child welfare staff focus on their shared vision to ensure individuals have access to appropriate mental health services
- Increased knowledge gained during the test helped one attorney to successfully advocate for appropriate services for their client
- A MCO representative acquired a deeper understanding of the struggles counties face regarding access to MH services, which will help them in conversations with their colleagues
- One MH provider noted that the test process reinvigorated their county's efforts towards collaboration between child welfare and MH

As the MHWG concluded its third year, there were many accomplishments to celebrate. A summary of findings and conclusions learned throughout the

year's evaluations, discussions, education sessions, and county testing process are included below.

Summary of Third-Year Findings and Conclusions

- ❖ Many counties attending LRT meetings report that dependent children and their caregivers lack access to adequate MH services.
- ❖ It can be helpful to provide support and services to "bridge the gap" until adequate mental health services become available.
- ❖ Mental Health treatment can begin with an assessment or intake and does not require a formal evaluation.
- ❖ The purpose of mental health, psychiatric, or psychological evaluation differs in meaning for the Court, Child Welfare Professionals, and Mental Health Professionals. It's important to clarify what is needed.
- ❖ A Mental Health Liaison can help dependency professionals collaborate with and navigate through the mental health system.
- ❖ LCRTs can benefit from having a neutral facilitator guide mental health discussions.
- ❖ When prioritizing mental health, it is critical for LCRT to include key decision makers from the county Mental Health, Managed Care Organization, MH Providers, and School Districts.
- ❖ Communication and collaboration with school districts can help counties improve early identification and intervention for mental health issues.
- ❖ Dependency attorneys want more education and information about the local mental health system and services available, to help guide their clients.
- ❖ An easy-to-use Mental Health Resource Guide can help dependency professionals and families navigate the mental health system.

A physician once said, "The best medicine for humans is love."

Someone asked, "What if it doesn't work?"

He smiled and said, "Increase the dose."

~ unknown

The Mental Health Workgroup believes sufficient information has been researched, collected, and examined over the past year to inform its recommendations to the 2026 SRT. The Workgroup respectfully asks the SRT to approve the following recommendations.

2026 Mental Health Workgroup Recommendations

- 1) Consider the need for additional statewide mental health education for child welfare and dependency court professionals;
- 2) Continue to encourage and support Local Children’s Roundtables to prioritize mental health, utilizing the recommendations and tools developed by the MHWG, and encourage inclusion of mental health professionals;
- 3) Continue to analyze and develop strategies to improve mental health services and treatment for dependent children, as needed;
- 4) Examine the impact of parents’ mental health on providing a safe and supportive environment for their child, and potential strategies for addressing parents’ mental health needs; and
- 5) Examine the need for further support to Kinship Caregivers who are caring for a child with mental health challenges.