



1661 Worcester Road
Suite 206
Framingham, MA 01701

T 508.647.8385
www.ABHmass.org

Lydia Conley PRESIDENT / CEO
Lesli Suggs, LICSW CHAIR

ASSOCIATION
FOR BEHAVIORAL
HEALTHCARE

June 18, 2025

Senator Cindy F. Friedman, Chair
Joint Committee on Health Care Financing
State House, Room 313
Boston, MA 02133

Representative John J. Lawn, Jr., Chair
Joint Committee on Health Care Financing
State House, Room 236
Boston, MA 02133

Re: Association for Behavioral Healthcare Testimony in Support of S.874/H.1396, An Act Strengthening Mental Health Centers

Dear Chairs Friedman, Lawn, and Honorable Committee Members:

Thank you for your consideration of this written testimony in addition to my in-person testimony at the public hearing for S.874/H.1396 on May 12, 2025.

The Association for Behavioral Healthcare (ABH) represents 83 community-based mental health and substance use disorder treatment provider organizations. Three-quarters of our members operate Mental Health Centers. Our members are deeply committed to MassHealth members and individuals with commercial health coverage. On average, two-thirds of our members' third-party (insurance) revenue comes from Medicaid.

What is a Mental Health Center?

A Mental Health Center is a mental health clinic licensed by the Department of Public Health that contracts with MassHealth to provide behavioral health services to MassHealth members. Mental Health Centers offer psychotherapy and medication management for psychiatric illnesses such as anxiety and depression close to home and outside of a hospital. These services are often called outpatient services. By regulation, Mental Health Centers must have a psychiatrist, different types of therapists, a Medical Director, a mandatory range of therapy services (e.g., case and family consultation, individual, group, couple, family), after-hours coverage, and minimum operating hours. Private practices do not have these same requirements.

Adults and children can get *in-person* and telehealth outpatient services from Mental Health Centers. Although Mental Health Centers can provide local access to critical therapy and medication, there are thousands of people waiting for care.

What is the problem?

There is a well-documented crisis for individuals and families seeking mental health care, even when they have health insurance. Mental Health Centers are critical access points for outpatient mental health services for people with insurance. Today many centers are scaling back services due to decades of under-resourcing. Several Mental Health Centers testified before the Committee about their experience closing centers and the impact those closures had on community access to care. Others addressed their emergent considerations around closing centers due to deficits in the millions of dollars.

The rates paid to Mental Health Centers do not reflect the cost and value of the additional staffing and services provided in this setting. Mental Health Centers need to be paid adequately to be able to recruit and retain clinicians to meet the demand for services.

Mental Health Centers Increase Access to Care.

Mental Health Centers *increase access to care* by accepting MassHealth and private insurance. Many providers in private practice do not accept insurance, leaving Mental Health Centers as one of the only options for those who cannot afford to pay out-of-pocket.

Mental Health Centers Help Contain Costs.

Beyond providing critically needed services, Mental Health Centers *help contain costs* by providing nonacute care in the community that prevents conditions from worsening and requiring more expensive care settings. Robust community programs also provide individuals recovering from acute conditions with local support that allows them to be safely discharged from more costly levels of care.

Mental Health Centers Help Build the Behavioral Health Workforce.

Mental Health Centers *ensure a qualified behavioral health workforce by training the next generation of therapists*, who go on to work in schools, hospitals, primary care practices, and private practices.

Currently, more therapists are leaving Mental Health Centers than can be hired. A 2022 ABH survey showed that for every 10 therapists that were hired, 13 left. When there are not enough therapists, adults and children wait for care. In that same survey, Mental Health Centers reported almost 14,000 (13,797) people waiting for care and an average wait time of 15.3 weeks for ongoing therapy for children. It is cause for alarm for the entire continuum of care when Mental Health Centers, the key drivers of the behavioral health workforce, cannot keep pace with training needs.

How would S.874/H.1396 help?

S.874/H.1396, *An Act Strengthening Mental Health Centers* would require MassHealth to raise reimbursement rates for all outpatient mental health services whether provided in a Mental Health Center or in a private practice. A rate increase for all outpatient mental health settings is necessary to help address decades of under-funding.

The bills would mandate MassHealth review managed care rates every 2 years. Regular rate reviews would help prevent the current crisis-situation caused by chronic under-funding.

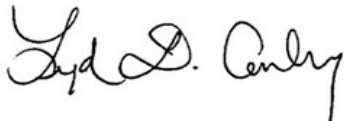
The legislation would require MassHealth to raise rates *even more* for outpatient services delivered by Mental Health Centers in recognition of the cost and value of the additional staffing and programs required by regulation.

S.874/H.1396 will strengthen Mental Health Centers by ensuring reimbursement rates that better reflect the cost of providing a wide range of accessible services. In an increasingly fragile healthcare system, bolstering these local, community-based providers is the best way to ensure accessible, quality, behavioral healthcare in Massachusetts now and in the future.

ABH respectfully requests these bills receive a favorable report.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lydia D. Conley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L" and "C".

Lydia Conley
President & CEO