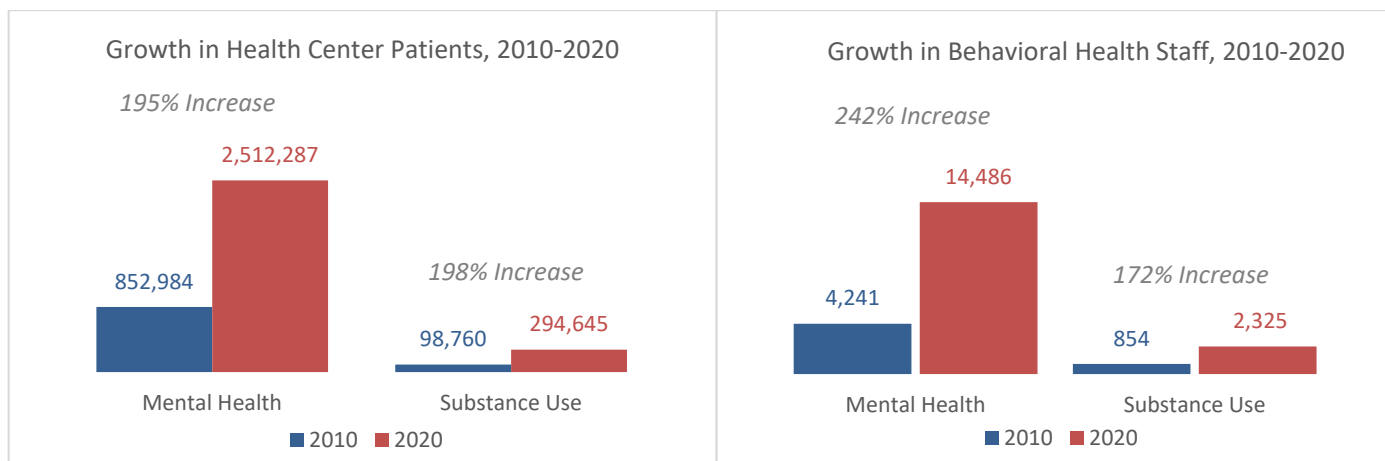


## Health Centers Are Addressing America's Mental Health Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic challenges have led to a surge in the number of people living with mental illness and substance use disorders. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 1 in 5 Americans live with a mental illness<sup>1</sup> and research from the Kaiser Family Foundation showed that adults experiencing anxiety and/or depression quadrupled from 11% in 2019 to 41% in 2021<sup>2</sup>. For communities of color who have experienced disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths, the pandemic's impact on mental health has been even more pronounced. Almost half (48%) of Non-Hispanic Black adults and 46.3% of Latinx adults reported symptoms of depression or anxiety, compared to 40.9% of Non-Hispanic White adults<sup>2</sup> in 2021.

Community Health Centers are responding to the emerging behavioral health crisis in medically underserved communities hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Health centers provide care regardless of income or insurance status and serve nearly 29 million patients nationwide, a majority of whom are from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. Health centers are a key resource for patients who otherwise may not have access to behavioral health care, especially for the more than one-third of Americans who live in Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas<sup>3</sup>. Health centers have steadily expanded behavioral health services in medically underserved communities over the past decade to address this gap. As the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the behavioral health crisis, health centers rapidly adapted to continue providing mental health and substance use treatment to their patients despite new barriers to care.

Health centers have dramatically expanded behavioral health services to meet the demand for care. In 2020, health centers provided care to over 2.5 million patients with mental health care needs and nearly 295,000 patients with substance use disorders (SUD)<sup>4</sup>. The number of patients receiving behavioral health services at health centers grew by almost 200% from 2010-2020. Health centers have expanded their behavioral health workforce in an unprecedented effort to keep up with demand. **The number of mental health professionals at health centers grew by 242% since 2010**, reaching 14,486 practitioners in 2020<sup>4</sup>.



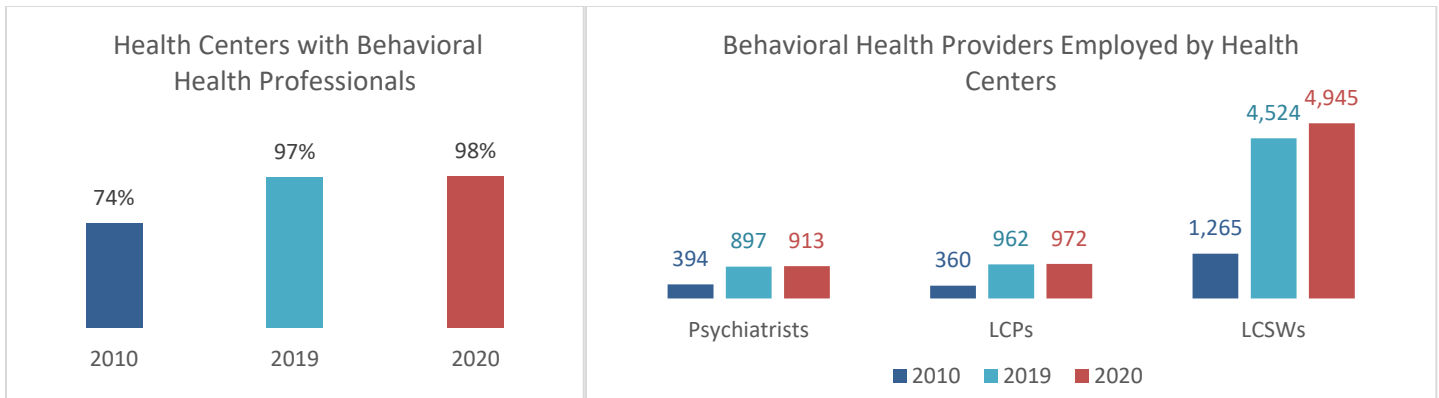
Health centers provide specialized behavioral health care to patients. The share of health centers that have specialized mental health professionals on staff has continued to grow, reaching 98% in 2020<sup>4</sup>, despite the COVID-19 pandemic placing unprecedented strain on the health center workforce. Health centers employ a range of mental health providers, including psychiatrists who can prescribe medication as needed, as well as Licensed Clinical Psychologists (LCPs) and Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSWs), both of which are trained to provide counseling and psychotherapy.

<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Mental Health. *Statistics: Mental Illness*. January 2022. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>

<sup>2</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation. *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use*. February 2021. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

<sup>3</sup> The White House. *FACT SHEET: President Biden to Announce Strategy to Address Our National Mental Health Crisis, As Part of Unity Agenda in his First State of the Union*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/01/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-announce-strategy-to-address-our-national-mental-health-crisis-as-part-of-unity-agenda-in-his-first-state-of-the-union/>

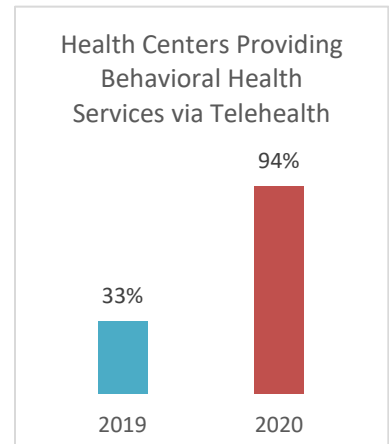
<sup>4</sup> 2020 Uniform Data System. Bureau of Primary Health Care, HRSA, DHHS



Health centers that do not have specialists still provide behavioral health care through primary care services. Considering all forms of service provision, **99.9% of health centers provided care to patients with behavioral health needs in 2020<sup>4</sup>**. Health centers treat patients for a range of mental health conditions, including depression and mood disorders, anxiety and PTSD, ADHD, and more. Patients can also visit health centers for aid in recovering from substance use disorders, including for medication-assisted treatment.

Patients treated at health centers for behavioral health conditions in 2020 (in millions) <sup>4</sup>									
Depression/ Mood Disorders	Anxiety/ PTSD	ADHD/ Behavioral	Other Mental Health	Opioid Use Disorder	Alcohol-related Disorders	Tobacco Disorder	Use	Other SUD	
2.6	2.7	0.6	1.9	0.2	0.4	1.1		0.6	

Health centers rapidly adapted to provide telehealth services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Health centers were among the first to adopt telehealth technology to meet patients where they are and minimize COVID-19 infection risk. **94% of health centers utilized telehealth for behavioral health services in 2020 – a 61-percentage point increase in just one year<sup>4</sup>**. Health centers’ quick adoption of multiple modalities allowed them to provide approximately the same amount of behavioral health services in 2019 as they did in 2020. This innovation was crucial for patients’ access to care while grappling with the mental health challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, 70% of health centers report that the adoption of audio-only telehealth allowed them to treat more patients with behavioral health needs than before<sup>5</sup>.



NACHC recommends policies to support behavioral health services. Health centers still face several barriers to providing comprehensive behavioral health care. The nationwide workforce shortage, marketplace competition, and burnout due to the COVID-19 pandemic make it difficult to recruit and retain enough providers to meet demand. As outlined in the recent [Health Center Workforce Report](#), **NACHC recommends expanding the list of billable providers** on integrated care teams to include Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, Peer Support Specialists, Licensed Addiction Counselors, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners, Community Health Workers, and others<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, **increased funding for educational programs** which provide scholarships and loan forgiveness to trainees that serve in high-need areas will help to expand and diversify the next generation of behavioral health providers<sup>6</sup>. NACHC also recommends investment in infrastructure and policy initiatives that support **behavioral health integration**. Strengthening mental health parity laws, investing in electronic infrastructure, and support for multidisciplinary care teams will enable behavioral health services to be fully integrated into care plans, improving access to care. Finally, Medicare **telehealth flexibilities** implemented at the COVID-19 pandemic onset should be made permanent to prevent disruption of services as the public health emergency expires.

Health centers are leaders in behavioral health innovation, implementing telehealth during COVID-19 and expanding access through creative partnerships with schools and law enforcement. The policies outlined here would support health centers as they continue to find new ways to expand behavioral health care that is comprehensive, culturally competent, and accessible for medically underserved patients nationwide.

<sup>5</sup> National Association of Community Health Centers. Telehealth and Health Centers During COVID-19. July 2021. [www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Audio-Only-Infographic.pdf](http://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Audio-Only-Infographic.pdf)  
<sup>6</sup> National Association of Community Health Centers. Current State of the Health Center Workforce. April 2022. <https://www.nachc.org/current-state-of-the-health-center-workforce/>

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