Behavioral Health Advisory Board (BHAB) Mid-Year Retreat
Behavioral Health Case Scenario: Navigating Pathways

Community Experience 1 – *How do I get into the system? (Finding the Right Door)*

Maria is 34 years old and has recently begun experiencing increasing anxiety and depression. She has difficulty sleeping, finds it harder to concentrate at work, and has started withdrawing from family and friends. Recognizing that she needs help before her symptoms become more serious, Maria decides to seek behavioral health care.

Maria has Medi-Cal and she has heard that California has expanded behavioral health programs in recent years, but she isn't sure how the different services, organizations, and funding systems fit together—or where she should begin. She starts by calling her Managed Care Plan (MCP), which begins its screening process to determine whether she meets criteria for Specialty Mental Health Services (SMHS) and outpatient mental health care. The MCP explains that, based on the screening results, it can help her access the appropriate mental health services through its provider network. As Maria begins contacting providers, she discovers that one is no longer accepting new patients, another has a lengthy wait for appointments, and a third no longer participates with her health plan. As her symptoms worsen, Maria learns about County Behavioral Health Services. She does not know who to call next or how to access the help she needs, Maria is still uncertain about which services best fit her needs and how to move forward. Maria begins to feel discouraged—not because anyone has been unhelpful, but because the behavioral health system feels difficult to understand.

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Community Experience 2 – *How do we support families early?*

Alex is a 15-year-old sophomore at a public high school in San Diego County. Over the past several months, teachers have noticed he has become increasingly withdrawn. He used to enjoy soccer and spend time with friends, but now he often eats lunch alone and has missed multiple days of school. His grades have dropped from A's and B's to mostly D's. Over the past year, Alex has also begun missing more school, and his mother has been contacted several times because of concerns about his attendance and emotional well-being. She worries that without help, things may continue to get worse for both Alex and their family. One afternoon, a teacher overhears Alex tell a friend that "everyone would probably be better off without me." The school counselor meets with Alex the same day. Alex says he's been feeling depressed for months and sometimes thinks about not wanting to wake up, but denies having a plan to hurt himself. Alex's mother wants to help but has never navigated behavioral health services before.

She says:
"I just want to make sure my son gets the help he needs, but I don't know where to start. Everyone tells me to call someone different—the school, our pediatrician, our insurance, or the County. I'm not sure who can actually help us."

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Community Experience 3 – *How do we keep recovery going?*

James is 46 years old and has lived with bipolar disorder for many years. After several hospitalizations, he recently stabilized on medication and is motivated to continue treatment. He has been consistently attending appointments and working closely with his treatment team. However, he has been sleeping in his car since losing his apartment several months ago. The stress of finding a safe place to sleep each night is making it increasingly difficult to keep appointments, store medications safely, maintain employment, and focus on recovery. James recently started a part-time job but worries he won't be able to keep it because he has nowhere reliable to sleep, shower, or safely store his belongings. His clinician believes James is doing well clinically but worries that without stable housing, another crisis may only be a matter of time.

James says:
"I'm finally doing everything everyone asked me to do. I go to my appointments, I take my medication, and I'm trying to move forward. But it feels like everyone is helping with one part of my life, and I'm still struggling to put all the pieces together."

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Community Experience 4 – *How do we support people with the most complex needs across multiple systems?*

Michael is 39 years old and has lived with schizophrenia for many years. When he consistently engages in treatment, he is able to live independently and maintain relationships with his family. Over the past year, however, he has gradually stopped taking medication and withdrawn from services.

Over the past six months:

- Family members have called 988 and mobile crisis teams several times.
- Law enforcement has responded to multiple calls from community members concerned about Michael's behavior.
- Michael has been transported to emergency departments on several occasions and, after evaluation, has sometimes been hospitalized briefly before being discharged.
- Outreach teams have attempted to engage him in voluntary services, but he usually declines or disengages shortly afterward.
- Michael is now sleeping intermittently outdoors, has lost significant weight, and often appears confused or paranoid in public.

Michael's sister says:
"It feels like every crisis starts the process all over again. Hospitals, law enforcement, outreach teams... everyone is trying to help, but nothing seems to last. It feels like every part of the system knows one piece of my brother's story, but nobody sees the whole picture. People keep telling me different things about CARE Court, conservatorship, and involuntary treatment, and I don't understand when any of those actually apply. I just want to know what happens next when someone is too sick to ask for help themselves."