



March 5, 2026

To: San Diego County Board of Supervisors

Subject: Behavioral Health Advisory Board (BHAB) – First Quarter 2026 Update and Budget Priorities

The San Diego County BHAB is a 20-member citizen board whose purpose is to review and evaluate the County's behavioral health needs, services, programs, facilities, and procedures, and to help ensure citizen and professional involvement in the behavioral health planning process.

BHAB is a state-mandated advisory body comprised of community members, behavioral health consumers and family members, individuals in recovery, veterans, employees of local education agencies, and transition-age youth (a Transitional Age Youth member has not yet been appointed at the time of this letter). This diverse membership provides insight grounded in lived experience, professional expertise, and community engagement across San Diego County.

BHAB meets regularly on the **first Thursday of each month from 2:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.**, and we welcome and encourage members of the Board of Supervisors and your staff to attend. Due to scheduling and the County calendar, our first meeting of 2026 was held in February, and regular monthly meetings are continuing.

Each year, **BHAB identifies priorities** that enhance the board's value to the community and inform the establishment of BHAB subcommittees. Full reports from the 2025 Subcommittees and their associated recommendations are available in the March and April 2026 BHAB meeting materials.

The goal of this *new* quarterly report from our board is to keep you updated on our activities and provide insight into community priorities for behavioral health.

2026 Priorities and Subcommittees

BHAB supports efforts to strengthen a culture of transparency across the behavioral health continuum of care. This includes encouraging **open sharing of both strengths and challenges** among service providers, system partners, and individuals receiving services. Transparency is essential to understanding system performance, identifying gaps, and improving outcomes for the people the system is designed to serve.

BHAB will **strengthen clear, consistent, two-way communication** by creating accessible, sustainable communication mechanisms, informed by community-based organizations, contracted partners, and other stakeholders' input, to elevate insights, concerns, and lived experience directly with BHAB, including around challenges navigating the behavioral health system. BHAB will focus on improving the flow of timely and accurate information back to the community about initiatives, services, policies, navigation supports, and engagement opportunities to build trust, transparency, and meaningful community influence on system priorities.

These priorities will be woven through the work of the ad hoc subcommittees established by the board:

- **Access to the Continuum of Care for Children, Youth, and Adults Impacted by Mental Health and Substance Use**
 - Goal: Educating the community on services provided by the County, fully communicating all behavioral health services available for successfully locating resources to prevent gaps in the continuity of services, so that the services follow children, youth, and adults impacted by Mental Health and Substance Use.
- **Involuntary Treatment – Lanterman-Petris-Short**
 - Goal: To become familiar with the Lanterman-Petris-Short (LPS) law to deliberate on options to advise the BHAB body, Board of Supervisors, Behavioral Health Services (BHS), and others as appropriate for LPS implementation, inclusive of support for disability accommodations.

At its **February 2026 meeting**, BHAB welcomed and congratulated Nadia Privara Brahms, who was recently appointed by the CAO, and highlighted the importance of BHAB's role in the selection of BHS leadership. The board welcomed guests from Alcohol and Drug Service Provider Association (ADSPA) and Mental Health Contractors Association (MHCA) to discuss the growing uncertainty associated with federal funding streams, including recent rescissions and reinstatements of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant funding. These fluctuations create challenges for providers in the County ecosystem in planning staffing, maintaining service continuity, and sustaining programs that rely on time-limited or discretionary funding. BHAB emphasized that fiscal uncertainty at the federal and state levels reinforces the importance of **maintaining stable local funding for core services and protecting the infrastructure needed to serve residents**. Members of the board highlighted the ripple effect for patients when one component of the continuum is cut, such as the impact on Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHC) programs if Mobile Crisis Response Team (MCRT) is defunded.

Priorities for Consideration in the Budget

BHAB respectfully urges that, as the County navigates a challenging fiscal environment, budget decisions prioritize protecting the core behavioral health continuum of care and sustaining and growing the level of service capacity already identified through County planning efforts and the Optimal Care Pathways model for the adult Mental Health system of care, Children and Youth system of care, and Substance Use Disorder (SUD) system of care. Federal and state fiscal decisions are likely to place additional pressure on the behavioral health system, making local stability even more critical. BHAB stands ready to serve as a thought partner and community forum to support the Board of Supervisors in identifying system impacts, weighing risks to the continuum of care, and helping inform difficult but necessary decisions in the months ahead.

BHAB respectfully offers the following priorities and considerations as the County enters a challenging fiscal environment and begins planning for the FY 2026–27 budget.

Fund the System Required to Serve the Population

The County's Optimal Care Pathways model has already identified the service capacity required to meet current demand. Budget decisions should prioritize protecting that baseline infrastructure. This body of work includes workforce, adult mental health, SUD, and children and youth (expected in March).

Support Robust Community Engagement for Integrated Planning

Investments in a strong, coordinated community engagement processes to inform integrated behavioral health planning will result in more trust, early identification of system gaps, and advancing equitable, community-driven solutions across the continuum. Meaningful engagement with consumers, family members, youth, community-based organizations, providers, and other stakeholders strengthens transparency, improves policy alignment, and ensures that planning decisions reflect lived experience and local needs. This is particularly important given the dramatic changes ahead due to One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R.1) and Behavioral Health Services Act (BHSA).

Sustain Community-Based Services that Prevent Institutionalization and Incarceration While Maintaining the Crisis Continuum

BHAB supports continued investment in the full crisis continuum, including MCRT, Crisis Stabilization Units (CSU), psychiatric inpatient and step-down capacity, and community-based crisis alternatives.

Equally important are community-based services that prevent institutionalization and incarceration and support individuals in the least restrictive setting. The County should continue strengthening services for justice-involved individuals and building on prior recommendations to improve transitions of care, reentry support, and continuity across systems.

Support Workforce and Provider Network Stability

BHAB supports continued investment in workforce recruitment and retention initiatives, training and technical assistance, competitive reimbursement rates, and contract stability to ensure provider sustainability.

In addition, BHAB emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive workforce development and service delivery. This includes language access, culturally specific services, and contracting approaches that enable smaller, community-rooted providers to meaningfully participate in County systems and serve the diverse communities of San Diego County.

Leverage County Systems to Support Behavioral Health

BHAB encourages the County to continue expanding efforts to leverage broader County infrastructure to support behavioral health outcomes. Behavioral health needs to intersect with multiple County functions, including Public Health, housing and homelessness services, aging and disability services, child and family systems, and justice and reentry services.

Strategic coordination across departments can improve early identification, reduce long-term costs, and address social and environmental factors that influence behavioral health outcomes. This is particularly important given the reduction in prevention focused programs funded under BHSA cost allocations and the separation of BHS from Healthy and Human Services Act (HHSA). BHAB strongly encourages continued investment in prevention and early intervention, including programs administered through Public Health and community partnerships. Prevention efforts reduce future demand on crisis and inpatient systems, improve long-term outcomes, and strengthen community resilience. These investments are among the most cost-effective tools available to the County.

Support Peer-Run and Peer-Led Services

BHAB also wishes to highlight the critical role of peer-led and peer-run services within the behavioral health continuum of care. Peers provide engagement, trust, and continuity of support that compliment clinical services and improve long-term recovery outcomes. There are several peer service priorities that should be protected and strengthened including peer respite programs, clubhouses, warmlines, Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) programs, and peer workforce investments:

Elevate Youth Behavioral Health

BHAB continues to emphasize the importance of strengthening behavioral health services for children, adolescents, and transition-age youth. Early intervention, school-linked services, family engagement, and prevention programs are critical to improving long-term outcomes and reducing future demand on crisis and inpatient systems. Our Board is required under BHSA to have a member appointed who is in the Transitional Age Youth demographic and we encourage your offices to consider this when making new appointments to the Board.

Why This Matters

Reductions to baseline behavioral health services can produce immediate and measurable system impacts, including increased emergency department utilization, longer wait times for outpatient and crisis services, greater strain on law enforcement and correctional systems, loss of trained workforce and provider capacity, and rising homelessness and hospitalization rates.

Once service capacity is lost, particularly workforce and community-based providers, it can take years to rebuild. Protecting core infrastructure is therefore essential to maintaining system stability and meeting the needs identified through County planning and community engagement efforts. When the behavioral health system is working it looks like: timely access, seamless transitions, reduced involuntary holds and recidivism, and reduced hospitalizations.

BHAB recognizes the difficult fiscal decisions ahead and stands ready to serve as a thought partner in evaluating risks, assessing tradeoffs, and helping protect the behavioral health continuum during this period of fiscal constraint and system change.

Respectfully submitted,

Amanda Berry

Chair, San Diego County Behavioral Health Advisory Board