

Older Adult Behavioral Health Roundtable Series

Spring 2023

Building local behavioral health capacity, focusing on equity, and strengthening community-based supports for older adults are key 2023-24 Master Plan for Aging (MPA) initiatives. The California Department of Aging (CDA), together with older adults and family members, community-based organizations, legislative partners, local providers, ethnic media, and MPA funders, recently held a series of Older Adult Behavioral Health Roundtables.

Over the course of four weeks, more than 150 people from across the state shared their perspectives on how California can better support older adults experiencing behavioral health challenges with a focus on people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Four roundtable discussions took place:

- Central Valley - Fresno, March 29, 2023
- Inland Empire - San Bernardino, April 13, 2023
- Rural Northern California - Ukiah, April 21, 2023
- Bay Area - San Francisco, April 27, 2023

The roundtables would not have been possible without the strong leadership and active engagement of local aging services providers and elected officials. With their support, the roundtables uplifted the lived and learned experience of older adults, family caregivers, and providers from each community.



Key themes and recommendations that emerged include:

Social Isolation

Themes:

- The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated feelings of grief, loss, despair, loneliness, depression, and anxiety for many older adults. However, it was also noted that isolation was endemic prior to the pandemic, and COVID-19 was an accelerator.
- Older adults have found support in existing warm lines that help address social isolation, yet the funding is set to expire in the near future.



Recommendations:

- Advance programs and policies that promote inclusion and belonging, where older adults are engaged in the community and empowered to advocate for their well-being.
- Renew funding for warm lines that combat social isolation to prevent program discontinuation.
- Build capacity among local community-based providers – these trusted local partners are often the first line of support for older adults.

Stigma

Themes:

- A growing number of older Californians encounter multiple, intersectional stigmas, including ageism, ableism, mental health bias, and discrimination against race, ethnicity, language, culture, sexual orientation, and gender identity.
- Negative, often prejudicial stereotypes are frequently used by media to portray older adults and overly emphasize their physical, mental, and cognitive deficits.
- Many older adults feel stigma in asking for help and are reluctant to seek out available behavioral health services.
- Society often forgets that older adults have significant behavioral health needs to address – and that it is not part of “normal aging” to feel lonely, depressed, or isolated.

Recommendations:

- Elevate positive stories that uplift the voices of older adults, emphasizing the important roles they play as integral parts of their communities.
- Increase outreach and education to address stigma and promote intergenerational acceptance.
- Develop culturally appropriate, trauma-informed behavioral health services that are tailored to older adults in response to an increasingly diverse population.



Workforce

Themes:

- A lack of trained, culturally responsive providers across the behavioral health continuum (from peer counselors to therapists to psychologists to physicians) prevents older adults from receiving the services they need.
- The behavioral health workforce should reflect the state's diversity and be trained and equipped to work with older adults experiencing behavioral health challenges.

Recommendation:

- Invest in education, cultural competence training, loan forgiveness, and career incentives to create a pipeline of providers to meet the unique needs of this growing population.

Clinical Complexities

Themes:

- Many older adults have multiple co-occurring medical and behavioral health conditions that are often difficult to assess and address due to their complexity.
- Underlying complex conditions are masked or further complicated by polypharmacy, cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia, disability, and vision or hearing impairments.

Recommendations:

- Provide outreach and training to healthcare providers around clinical best practices and resources to meet the needs of older adults.
- Promote medical and behavioral health specializations that focus on the unique needs of older adults.

Access

Themes:

- Like other age groups, older adults require behavioral health support along the entire continuum of care, from prevention through supportive care during life transitions to crisis care. Yet older adults often struggle to access the services they need across the behavioral health continuum.
- Older adults and their families rely on trusted community partners who speak their language, understand their culture, affirm their identity, and are familiar with the unique needs of older adults in order to access reliable information, emotional support, and warm referrals.



Recommendations:

- Improve access to information, resources, and referrals to trusted community partners, focusing on communities of color and LGBTQ+ older adults.
- Build capacity across local trusted community partners to enhance their ability to prevent and respond to the behavioral health needs of California's diverse older adult population.

Health Care System Navigation

Themes:

- Health care systems in many cases are siloed, and place significant administrative burdens on providers and trusted community partners who are often best positioned to meet older adults where they are.
- Available behavioral health benefits are not well known and may be complex to navigate for older adults.

Recommendations:

- Increase Technical Assistance and Training for providers and trusted community partners to support access to care.
- Embed consumer guidance in existing community channels, such as the Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (HICAP).
- Increase access to care across health systems for older adults with Alzheimer's and related dementia, including those who also need specialty mental health services.

Additional Progress

In addition to the roundtables, key partners were active this spring with important related work:

- In April, the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) announced the award of \$20 million dollars to expand older adult behavioral health services in California. Through this program, 11 county and community organizations will implement one of two best practices in older adult behavioral health: PEARLS (Program to Encourage Active and Rewarding Lives) and Age Wise.
- Recently, Dr. Marci Adelman, a retired clinical psychologist, was appointed to serve on the California Health and Human Services (CalHHS) Agency Behavioral Health Task Force. Dr. Adelman is the co-founder of Openhouse, an LGBTQ+ senior resource and affordable housing provider in San Francisco, and a member of the California Commission on Aging.
- The California Department of Health Care Services' Office of Medicare Innovation and Integration recently invited health plans to join a Medicare Advantage Roundtable focused on older adult behavioral health.
- The Dementia Care Aware (DCA) program is available to healthcare providers across California, and provides training and support for healthcare teams to assess and address dementia to help people and families develop appropriate care plans.

What's next?

CDA has set up a dedicated email account for any additional comments and input you may have: oabh@aging.ca.gov. Your input will help inform our continued efforts to strengthen California's behavioral health continuum across the lifespan as part of the Master Plan for Aging.

