

The Texas Mental Health Crisis and The Role of Community Clinics: An Interview with Integral Care

Texas currently ranks last in mental health care accessibility, and a crisis is impending. A representative from Integral Care, Travis county's public mental health authority, sits down for a discussion on the roles community clinics play in filling all the gaps that the state has left wide open.



Image Courtesy of Side Effects Public Media

Following the school shooting in Uvalde, Governor Greg Abbott ignored public cries for gun control, stating that Texas simply needs to do a better job with mental health treatment. Ironically, in April, the Governor cut \$211 million from the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), which oversees mental health services in Texas. All the while, according to Mental Health America, nearly three-quarters of youth with major depression did not receive mental health treatment during the same year.

Mental Health America also notes that Texas ranked 51st out of all of the states and the District of Columbia when it comes to access for mental health care. The ranking factors included access to insurance, cost of insurance, access to education, and workforce availability. This raises the question: what role do community clinics play in filling in all the gaps that the state has left wide open for individuals who are seeking care?

Nearly 3.3 million adult Texans are living with mental illness between 2017 and 2018, according to the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), and that's just the amount that has been formally diagnosed. Clinics, such as [Integral Care](#) in Austin, Texas, work to support the health and well-being of adults and children living with mental illness, substance abuse disorder, and intellectual and developmental disabilities. According to their website, Integral Care was the first community center to provide high-quality, community-based behavioral health and intellectual disabilities services in Central Texas. When asked to discuss some assistance programs that are available to those seeking care, the representative stated:

“Integral Care helps people build health and well-being so everyone has the foundation to reach their full potential. We support adults and children living with mental illness, substance use disorder and intellectual and developmental disabilities in Travis County,” the representative said. “Our services include a 24-hour helpline for anyone who needs immediate support, ongoing counseling to improve mental health, drug and alcohol treatment to help with recovery, and housing to regain health and independence. No problem is too big or too small.”



Image Courtesy of A Fresh Start Therapy

[Hogg Foundation for Mental Health](#) reports that people with mental illness are more likely than other populations to experience stigma, physical abuse, solitary confinement, and sexual victimization. Integral Care partners with local organizations to strengthen a community network in support of mental health, offers guidance to other behavioral health agencies, and continues to battle stigma surrounding mental illness throughout the community. They now have over 40

locations across Travis County. When asked to expand on residential treatment programs that are offered and how they are made accessible, the representative said:

“Integral Care’s residential services provide mental health crisis care in a safe overnight facility. Services include emotional support, medical support, medicine, case management, social and life skills training, help returning to the community, and connection to Integral Care programs and local resources for ongoing support and recovery. Referrals come from Integral Care Crisis Services, law enforcement, and local hospitals.”



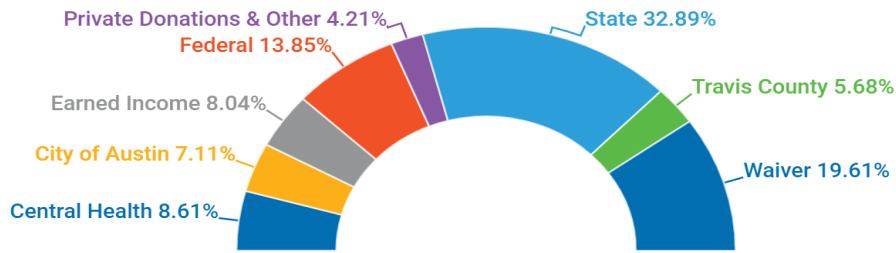
Image Courtesy of Yelp

The Rees-jones foundation says that the Texas system is at capacity due to staffing challenges, such as high-turnover, costs associated with training providers, and recruiting and retaining staff that are culturally competent for the population that the program serves. Circumstances, such as housing insecurity, unemployment, and lack of health insurance, all contribute to high rates of stress and depression, especially during COVID-19 in which these factors hit low-income residents especially hard. During the time of the pandemic, clinics such as Integral Care were left scrambling to pick up the pieces. The representative said:

“When COVID-19 rapidly shut down our in-person clinics, we pivoted to telehealth for many of our services. We distributed tablets to area group homes and nursing facilities to keep people with IDD connected to care and social support,” the representative stated. “Our clinicians provided mental health services via phone and video calls. When situations demanded face-to-face care, our team was there. Our crisis teams and homeless outreach teams continued their work in the community.”

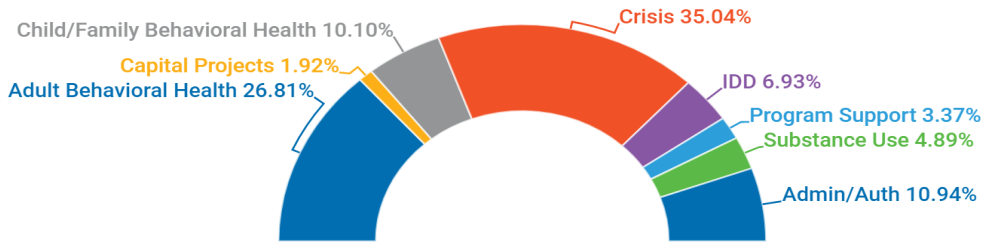
FY21 REVENUE: \$105,540,457

FY21 EXPENSES: \$103,367,829



FY21 REVENUE: \$105,540,457

FY21 EXPENSES: \$103,367,829



According to a journal from [Texas Medical Association](#), many outpatient services across the state have not increased correspondingly to their need, and many private payers have considered mental health services optional. Meanwhile, Integral Care receives funding from a variety of federal, state, and local funding contracts, as well as fee-for-service and private grants and donations. When asked to explain the process that clients must go through to receive free or reduced care, the representative replied:

“There is financial help for those who cannot pay for the health care they need. The Charity Care program helps people who can't pay their bills, people who don't have insurance, and people who have coverage with an insurance carrier but can't pay their portion of the bill after insurance pays,” the representative said. “Those who fall between 0 and 150% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines may be able to get a 100% discount. Those who have a total household income above 150%, may be able to get other discounts. A Financial Assessment must be completed to qualify.”

As the need for care rises, community clinics continue to meet people’s needs across the state. Integral Care says their greatest strength in this process is building meaningful connections with people – the team members, those they support, and the community at large.