



# Strengthening Ohio's Behavioral Health Workforce to Help Children Thrive

Ensuring all children in Ohio have a healthy and happy start to life is essential to ensuring the state's future prosperity. Research shows that childhood and adolescence are critical times for mental health because of the rapid brain growth and development during these periods of life. It is also a time when some mental health conditions can begin onsetting, some of which would benefit from mental health treatment. One of the most common ways for children to receive mental health treatment in the state is through Medicaid coverage. The importance of child development, safety, and mental health has been continuously stated as an essential priority of the DeWine administration and the General Assembly.

## Challenge

**Many children in Ohio lack access to the care they need.** At the beginning of 2024, the unwinding of the pandemic-era Medicaid rules resulted in **121,577 children in Ohio losing access to Medicaid**, cutting many of them off from necessary physical and mental healthcare. This lack of insurance is an issue enough on its own, but the lack of a strong behavioral health workforce exacerbates the problem.

Over five million Ohioans live in [mental healthcare professional shortage areas](#) (HPSPAs). This is a problem that has been building for years. In 2021, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services [reported](#) that **demand for mental health services rose by 353%** between 2013 and 2019, but the **workforce only increased by 174%** during the same time. One of the most significant contributors to the lack of growth in the field is [inadequate salaries](#). The average salary for social workers is only \$50,400, while comparable fields such as teachers and nurses have median salaries of \$76,070 and \$84,430, respectively. This leads to individuals leaving the behavioral health field and makes recruiting new workers difficult. This is especially troubling because **only around 30% of the state's behavioral health treatment needs are being met**. This lack of services will continue unless there is an improvement in accessibility and reimbursement for services.

## Opportunity

These challenges can be tackled by investing more in Ohio's Medicaid program. Many mental health providers interact regularly with the Medicaid system, but Social Workers specifically are heavily impacted by Medicaid rates and accessibility. Around [70% of Social Workers](#) report that their clients receive Medicaid or live in poverty. Investing in Medicaid would be an investment in the human infrastructure of the state. Doing so would increase the accessibility of mental health providers and attract more workers into the behavioral health field.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendations

- Increase Medicaid reimbursement rates by 3% to improve salaries for mental health providers, making the field more appealing and helping to expand the workforce.
- Expand Medicaid/CHIP eligibility to 300% of the FPL to provide mental healthcare for more children.
- Allow schools to be reimbursed for Medicaid services without IEP to increase the number of students that schools can provide mental health services to.

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Published: February 2025