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Alabama voters say mental health a top concern, express support for more funding

MONTGOMERY, Ala. -- More than 90 percent of Alabamians identify mental health as a key priority for the state, and a strong majority favor additional funding to improve access to mental health and substance abuse services, according to a new poll of Alabama voters.

When asked about all types of healthcare, 93 percent identified mental health as an important priority, and 90 percent said mental health and substance abuse issues are hurting communities. Almost 46 percent said they or someone close to them had experienced a mental health crisis or attempted self-harm.

“Most Alabamians are painfully aware that there is a serious need for additional mental health services, and they clearly believe that meeting that need should be a priority for our policymakers,” said Holly McCorkle, the executive director of the Alabama Council for Behavioral Healthcare. “Alabamians want to see more resources invested in mental health treatment.”

The poll reflected strong support for steering more money to mental health treatment.

- Almost 82 percent believe a portion of proceeds from anticipated gambling legislation should go for mental health and gambling addiction treatment.
- More than 82 percent believe most of the state’s opioid settlement funds should be used for substance abuse treatment and prevention.
- Even though only 20 percent of Alabamians were aware of the 988 mental health crisis hotline, more than 52 percent expressed support for a 50-cent phone user fee to support 988 crisis services.

The poll of 620 Alabama voters was conducted in December by Cygnal on behalf of the Alabama Council for Behavioral Healthcare, the Behavioral Healthcare Alliance of Alabama, and NAMI Alabama. The poll’s margin of error is 3.93%.

Close to 52 percent of those surveyed believe mental health issues have gotten worse in recent years, and 90 percent said mental health issues are having a negative impact on public safety, overall health, public schools and prisons. More than 63 percent of Alabamians said they’d be more likely to vote for elected officials who prioritize mental health funding.

“Even though the state has expanded mental health services over the past few years, mental health care is viewed as being the most underserved area of health care by a margin of 4-1 to the next closest area,” said Molly Brooms, executive director of the Behavioral Healthcare Alliance of Alabama. “We are fortunate to have six new crisis centers in the state, but the overwhelming majority of counties have no access to these centers or to mobile crisis outreach teams.”

The poll demonstrated the scope of the problem as well as the gap in access to care. Forty-four percent of respondents who reported that they or someone close to them had experienced a mental health crisis said immediate help was not available when they needed it. Costs for treatment, lack of nearby treatment options, wait times for care and lack of health insurance were identified as the top barriers.

“The poll confirmed what many of us have seen first-hand,” said Kelly Emerson, executive director of NAMI Alabama, whose members include people with mental health issues and their families. “Too many Alabamians have experienced a mental health issue but have not been able to get help. They know that there is a serious gap between the services that are available and the needs that continue to exist.”

The three mental health groups are among a number of organizations pushing to expand mental health services in Alabama.

Current priorities include funding to help community mental health providers reduce workforce shortages and wait times for services, more beds to serve those who are involuntarily committed for mental health care, expanded substance use prevention and treatment with the state’s share of opioid settlement funds, and a stable state revenue source to support 988 crisis services.

The 988 crisis hotline was established by Congress in 2020. In 2022-23, the first year of operation, Alabama’s 988 line received 53,000 calls, a significant number of them from veterans.

The federal bill included startup funds for 988 but authorized states to establish ongoing funding to sustain operations for call centers, as well as crisis services and mobile-response units.

In 2023, Alabama legislators introduced a bill that would have established a 98-cent fee on phones to support 988 services in all counties. The bill died without getting to a vote.

McCorkle said the poll shows basic support for a phone fee to expand services and an opportunity to build even more support.

“The poll reflects the need to educate Alabamians more about the existence of the 988 crisis line and an opportunity to educate them about how a telephone fee would make a difference beyond just having a number to call,” McCorkle said. “Currently, two-thirds of Alabama counties lack access to a mental health crisis center or mobile-response team. We believe Alabamians would be even more supportive of a 988 fee if they knew that the proceeds would go toward expanding these services across Alabama.”

Leigh Few, who was a young mother when she was diagnosed with major depression and generalized anxiety, said access to care allowed her to reclaim her life, take care of her children and ultimately launch a successful career in community mental health.

“I want everyone to know that recovery is possible, but it depends on people being able to get the care they need, when they need it,” Few said. “This poll shows that Alabamians understand this and want to see more mental health services available for them and their loved ones. This should be a key priority for our state.”

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The Alabama Council of Behavioral Healthcare is made up of 20 community mental health providers that employ more than 5,200 people and serve more than 115,000 individuals with mental illness, substance use disorders and intellectual disabilities.

*The **Behavioral Healthcare Alliance of Alabama** is made up of six community mental health centers that offer behavioral health, addiction recovery and developmental support services for consumers, families and communities in 21 predominantly rural counties. The centers employ more than 1300 people and serve approximately 27,000 individuals.*

***NAMI Alabama** is the state chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness.*