

**It's who we are.
It's what we do.**

**Testimony of Behavioral Healthcare Partners of Central Ohio, Inc.
The Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
March 23, 2023**

Chairman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Health and Human Services Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Behavioral Healthcare Partners of Central Ohio, Inc.

My name is Dr. Kate St. James, and I am the President & CEO of Behavioral Healthcare Partners of Central Ohio, Inc. (BHP). Our primary service area is the Licking and Knox County region. BHP is a private, non-profit community behavioral healthcare organization that provides integrated mental health and addiction treatment services for youth, adults, and families.

Access to care for behavioral health, was and continues to be greatly impacted by the pandemic. The increased demand for services and staff shortages are creating unprecedented wait times. Locally and nationally, wait times for behavioral health services are now at over five weeks. Often individuals give up on accessing services. As a result, they have increased rates of hospitalization and emergency care for untreated behavioral health issues. Annually, nearly 3,000 visits are made to the Emergency Departments at Licking Memorial Hospital and Knox Community Hospital for behavioral health reasons.

The answer to this dilemma is behavioral health urgent care. These clinics provide a community-based option to stabilize and provide immediate relief to individuals needing urgent behavioral healthcare in a way that reduces crisis escalation and potentially unnecessary trips to the emergency department, hospitalizations, and even incarcerations. Individuals can be seen quickly without having to wait for an appointment. Until a few years ago this was a critical missing link in behavioral health care both locally and nationally. Several years ago, BHP began planning for this level of service and in November of 2021 launched the first behavioral health urgent care clinic for this region in Newark. In February of 2022, BHP opened a second urgent care clinic in Mount Vernon. The BHP urgent care clinics serve individuals twelve years and older who are experiencing behavioral health or emotional distress. Individuals can walk-in and receive immediate treatment by licensed behavioral health professionals. Treatment includes counseling, psychiatry, crisis intervention, and linkage to community resources.

By improving access to behavioral healthcare services for those needing treatment on an urgent basis, BHP can potentially reduce more costly trips to emergency departments, inpatient psychiatric hospitalizations, and/or incarceration. Behavioral health urgent care clinics save time (reduced overall wait times in emergency departments and for behavioral health services), money (diverts individuals from more expensive levels of care which ultimately saves in insurance costs and taxpayer dollars), and lives (targeted urgent care services potentially disrupt the behavioral health issue before it escalates into a life-or-death situation).

Over the past year and a half, the BHP urgent care clinics have provided nearly 4,000 services to youth and adults from Licking and Knox Counties as well as surrounding areas. Demographics show a wide range

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of diversity in socio-economic, gender, and age of the individuals being served through the urgent care clinics. Data collected from these individuals show that 60% of individuals are accessing behavioral health services for the first time. Additionally, over 95% of individuals seeking care from the BHP urgent care clinics are being diverted from more expensive levels of treatment, such as emergency department visits or hospitalizations.

Many stories have been relayed to me over the past year and a half of how the BHP urgent care clinics have saved or changed lives. Two stories stick out to me. The first is about a young teen who was being bullied at school and online. She was becoming depressed and anxious, not engaging with her family or friends, stopped doing her schoolwork, and was refusing to go to school. Her parents were worried about her health, both mental and physical, as well as her ability to meet academic milestones. They had tried to get her into services both in and out of county with the wait time for her first visit being well beyond the end of the school year. They brought her to the BHP urgent care clinic where she was seen immediately. The counselor on staff was able to work with her and her parents to develop a plan for her to alleviate her depression, calm her anxiety, and finish out the school year, with the offer that she could come back to the clinic anytime while she was waiting to see an ongoing provider. She did return two more times. Not long after the third visit her parents let the urgent care staff know that she was significantly better and had finished the school year.

The second example was relayed directly to me by a colleague in the community. The individual started her story with "your urgent care saved my cousin's life!" Her cousin had reached out to her and reported that she "no longer wanted to live." No one in the family had ever used behavioral health services and were unsure what to do. My colleague remembered hearing me talk about the urgent care and took her cousin there in hopes of getting help. She was seen immediately, and the BHP urgent care staff worked with her to stabilize her and the situation. Once she was stabilized, she was connected to ongoing services and was able to return home safely.

The startup of the BHP urgent care clinics, much like other clinics in the state, were the result of grant funding from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. These grants are non-renewing and there is currently no reimbursement mechanism to sustain the urgent care clinics in the short-term. However, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services has identified behavioral health urgent care as a critical piece of the State's crisis response for the citizens of Ohio and is working on a reimbursement model. In the meantime, behavioral health urgent cares will need short-term gap funding until the Department finalizes and implements a reimbursement structure.

I urge you to consider allocating gap funding to maintain the state's critical behavioral health urgent cares by adding additional funds to the operating budget of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services specifically for this purpose.

On behalf of Behavioral Healthcare Partners of Central Ohio, I thank you for your hard work for the citizens of Ohio and for consideration of this important and lifesaving service for our communities.