

Expert shares insight on new Texas mental health investments

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The Panhandle Behavioral Health Alliance (PBHA) hosted a legislative update and briefing event featuring Nelson Jarrin, senior vice president of state policy with the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (MMHPI), including insights into the latest developments in mental health policy as presented during their Wednesday afternoon luncheon held at the Central Church of Christ.

Jarrin, an attorney with a background in health care law and policy spanning over a decade, spoke of passed policies from this year's Texas Legislature and what this will mean for Amarillo and current mental health policies.

"The 88th Legislative Session was a historic session for investments in mental health funding. I came up here today to talk to representatives of these northern 27 counties about funding that is coming back here to address mental health gaps," Jarrin said.

"Overall, the Texas Legislature invested \$11.7 billion in behavioral health this legislative session. It is the single largest investment in mental health funding in any legislature in U.S. history."

As a part of House Bill 1, the 88th Texas Legislature approved a \$1.25 billion increase to the state's behavioral health funds for the 2023-24 annual budget, creating an overall total of \$9.37 billion, a 15.6% increase from the 2022-23 budget.

With the passing of Senate Bill 30, by Sen. Joan Huffman, \$2.6 billion will be provided to create new state hospitals and expand in patient capacity. For Amarillo, this includes the construction of an Amarillo state hospital, including 75 in-patient beds and at least 50 forensic beds. The budget for this new hospital is allotted at \$159 million.

In addition to this, a \$100 million grant will be available to county-based collaboratives to construct jail-diversion facilities, step-down facilities, supportive housing, and crisis units. A \$15.9 million grant will be made available for children's hospitals to construct inpatient mental health beds for children. Jarrin explains that these two grants do require a match, and that the stipulations concerning the grant will be released at a later date.

In Lubbock, \$121 million will be utilized to create a 50-bed Midwestern State University facility and create an addition to the Sunrise Canyon Hospital to allow 30 additional beds to the facility, with at least half of those utilized for forensic.

"The Texas State Legislature put a historic amount into new mental health facilities, and there will be a brand new hospital being built in Amarillo. Our oldest hospital was built in 1861 in

Austin, so when you think about legacy projects that will be around for decades and provide treatment to numerous families and to this community, that is one of the legacy projects that will happen here, but there are 17 in total going up across the state,” Jarrin said.

With expanding on funding to the Texas Mental Health Consortium, now reaching a biennial budget increase to \$337.1 million for the 2024-25 fiscal year, more mental healthcare will be available to children in the state. With this, the Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine, or TCHAT program, received \$172.7 million in funding to ensure availability to any willing school district in the state. Jarrin says that with this program, there does have to be parent approval for the child to utilize the program, but that that is necessary for the child to receive proper care, including all aspects of the child’s life to help reach a solution.

In addition, the previously established Child Psychiatry Access Network, or CPAN, expanded to include the Prenatal Psychiatry Access Network (PeriPAN) a hotline created for providers serving pregnant women and new mothers experiencing mental health distress and postpartum depression.

“There are continued investments in children’s mental health; mental illness is an illness of childhood with 50% of the symptoms showing by age 14. So, the legislature is continuing to invest in that as well as intensive services in the communities that can keep people out of more costly settings, delivering care when and where people need it,” Jarrin added.

Mental health grant programs also received an increase in funding, with the Mental Health Program for Justice-Involved Individuals receiving a \$30 million increase to help reduce recidivism, arrest and incarceration among people with mental illness. The Community Mental Health Grant Program, created to support community programs providing services and treatment to individuals with mental illness, received a \$55 million grant. And a new grant titled the Innovation Grant program was created, with a \$30 million grant to improve access to care for children and families seeking mental healthcare.

For the mental health workforce, which has seen an overall drop in personnel due to the pandemic, inflation, workforce crisis and other contributing issues, the legislature adopted a \$135 million salary increase at state hospitals, local mental health authorities received \$23.9 million to stabilize their workforce, and \$28 million was adopted to the Loan Repayment Plan for Mental Health Professionals.

“With all of these changes, this will mean greater access to care for the Panhandle community, and that is also going to mean improved quality of care as well as improved quantity of care, to better help those needing and seeking mental health,” Shree Veeramachaneni, PBHA executive director, said.

For more information about these grants and what it will mean for the community, visit PBHA online at <https://panhandlebehavioralhealthalliance.org/>