

Audit Report

Access to Mental Health Services

October 2019



City Council identified access to quality mental health care services as a key part of Strategic Direction 2023. The City funds mental health service providers through contracts and grants. City staff refer individuals to these outside service providers. However, departments do not have a coordinated approach for making or tracking these referrals. This includes training and guidance for staff. Also, the City does not have enough information to determine if individuals are accessing mental health services.

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Cover: Aerial view of downtown Austin, iStock.com/RoschetzkyIstockPhoto.

Objective

Does the City provide and/or support initiatives that ensure adequate mental health services are available and accessible?

Background

“Accessibility to quality health care services, both physical and mental” is one of the Strategic Direction 2023 (SD23) indicators in the Health & Environment outcome area.

Austin City Council identified access to mental health services as a priority. It is one of ten indicators where Council wants to see the most improvement over the next few years. A University of Texas publication¹ notes that community plays a key role in an individual’s mental health. “Places where people live, learn, work, play, and pray” can both help and hurt improvements to mental health. Further, “when the community around an individual is supportive, healthy, and provides equal opportunity, there are opportunities” to improve mental health and well-being.

The 2018 City of Austin Community Survey measured Austin residents’ level of satisfaction with access to quality mental health care they can afford. Of the respondents, about 23% reported being satisfied or very satisfied, 24% were neutral, and 18% were dissatisfied. Additionally, 35% of respondents reported not knowing their level of satisfaction with access to affordable mental health care. This could indicate that some portion of those respondents have not used or are not aware of these services.

Exhibit 1: Over 75% of Austin Residents Surveyed Were Less Than Satisfied With Access to Quality Mental Health Care They Can Afford



SOURCE: OCA analysis of 2018 City of Austin Community Survey results, June 2019.

Previous audits include our series on Homelessness, Austin Police Department’s Response to Mental Health-Related Incidents, and the recently released Social Service Contracting audit.

Our office has done previous work in the area of mental health. In prior audits, we saw that mental health issues impact several areas related to City services and operations. This audit focused on selected non-public safety departments and looked at how the City is meeting its goal to make mental health services available and accessible.

¹ “A Guide to Understanding Mental Health Systems and Services in Texas, 4th Edition – 2018” by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.

What We Found

Summary

The City funds mental health service providers through contracts and grants. City staff refer individuals to these outside service providers. However, departments do not have a coordinated approach for making or tracking these referrals. This includes training and guidance for staff. Also, the City does not have enough information to determine if individuals are accessing mental health services.

Finding

The City funds external providers of mental health services. City staff refers individuals to these service providers, but has opportunities to improve coordination, identify areas of need, and track these referrals to ensure that community needs are being met.

Social Service contracts and grants were approved in the fiscal year 2019 budget. In mid-2019, City Council approved additional mental health and wellness funding.

The City does not provide direct mental health services to the community. Austin Travis County Integral Care (Integral Care) is the designated Local Mental Health Authority (LMHA) for the Austin area. As the LMHA, Integral Care serves a variety of roles. These roles include providing mental health services, planning and coordinating with stakeholders, and providing training.

The City funds mental health service providers through contracts and grants.

The Austin City Council approved funding for mental health services through social service contracts and grants. Currently, Austin Public Health (APH) has five contracts (totaling approximately \$2.7 million) related to mental health. One of those contracts provides nearly \$2 million in funding for Integral Care. Also, the City Council recently took action for APH to enter into agreements with other entities to address African American mental health and wellness. Current funding is \$500,000 with options for up to \$1 million in additional funding.

The City Manager's fiscal year 2020 Proposed Budget includes \$23.4 million for social services contracts that include mental health services. The budget added \$1.2 million for Integral Care. Also, the APH budget includes \$5.3 million for mental health services with some of that funding targeted to the Asian Pacific-Islander and LGBTQIA+ communities.

The City does not effectively measure the need for mental health services.

According to City staff, there is not a standard definition of the term "mental health." Also, APH has not done a formal assessment of community needs for mental health services.² City staff were unsure if they were responsible for assessing the community need for mental health services. Integral Care staff said that as the LMHA, they are responsible for mental health service provision, coordination, planning, and training.

We did not see that City departments were collecting data specific to mental health services. For example, Austin 3-1-1 does not collect data that could identify mental health-related calls. Staff said 3-1-1 tracks data by department, not by topic area. If the City does not know the need for mental health services, it may not know if the funding provided is effective at addressing community needs.

² The most recent Community Health Assessment was completed in December 2017 and "identifies health-related needs and strengths of Austin and Travis County," including information about mental health and wellbeing.

City staff we spoke with cited Integral Care, 2-1-1, 3-1-1, 9-1-1, and the Homeless Outreach Street Team (HOST) as sources for a mental health referral.

Austin Convention Center reported sending their security staff to a Mental Health First Aid training offered by Integral Care and included de-escalation as a topic in annual staff training.

The City refers individuals to external providers of mental health services, but department staff cited different ways to make the referrals.

To determine how the City makes referrals, we identified departments that interact with the public. We spoke with staff at selected APH Neighborhood Centers, Austin Public Library (Library) branches, and Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) Recreation Centers. Staff reported they would call one of several sources or provide literature on available services, as needed. To which source staff directed referrals varied among and within departments. Also, Integral Care staff proactively visits one library branch twice a week. During this time, individuals can receive direct mental health services or referrals to other services.

City staff reported receiving relevant training for making these referrals. However, the level of training varied among departments. For example, Library staff reported feeling well-trained for mental health-related interactions. Staff in other departments noted that mental health training is not required. Also, not all staff had taken the training offered.

We also reviewed whether departments had policies or guidance to help staff address mental health encounters. Only PARD and 3-1-1 reported providing these resources. Building Services staff reported being available to assist other departments with how to de-escalate problematic encounters.

City staff may also refer individuals to mental health care providers during a crisis situation. For example, a police Mental Health Officer may refer an individual for mental health services during a crisis. Also, Downtown Austin Community Court case management assists individuals experiencing homelessness with access to services. These services include mental health care.³

The City does not consistently track mental health referrals to ensure that individuals are given the information needed to access mental health care and community needs are being met.

Generally, staff from APH, Library, and PARD reported that they do not use a formal tracking system to determine whether referred individuals actually received mental health services. City staff stated they do not track these referrals due to privacy concerns. At APH Neighborhood Centers, staff reported three scenarios related to mental health referrals. First, staff may enter an individual into the case management system if they need other services provided at a Neighborhood Center. Second, if referred by a Neighborhood Center nurse, staff would document the referral in the individual's medical chart and the nurse would follow-up. Third, when an individual is not entered into case management, staff may make a note with the individual's information and try to follow-up. It did not appear this happened in every instance.

Also, Integral Care does not track referral data from City of Austin locations in a way that could produce a report. For example, data collected

³ Our office looked at these crisis services as part of our Audit of APD Response to Mental Health-Related Incidents and our Homelessness Audit Series. See the reports on our website for more information.

by Integral Care from calls to the Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT) reflect the residential location of the individual referred for services, not the location of the incident. However, tracking referrals by City location does not appear to be required in the current contract between Integral Care and the City.

Without effective tracking of referrals from City locations, the City does not know if these referrals are effective at connecting individuals to services. Also, it does not allow the City to coordinate with Integral Care or other resources to target preventative, on-site services at locations with a demonstrated need.

Additional Observation

We analyzed City metrics used for tracking progress toward the SD23 goal of ensuring “accessibility to quality health care services, both physical and mental.” Current metrics do not effectively track accessibility or referrals from City locations. One metric measures the “number and percentage of clients supported through the City of Austin, including community-based preventative health screenings, who followed through with referrals to a healthcare provider or community resource.” However, the referrals and community resources referenced in this metric do not include mental health care services.

Two other mental health-related metrics track quantitative information: the number of “suicides and unintentional overdose deaths” and the “percentage of people who report 5 or more poor mental health days within the last 30 days.” These metrics do not show if the City is achieving its goal to make mental health services accessible to the community.

Recommendations and Management Response

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In order to ensure more consistency in addressing mental health-related encounters with members of the community, the Assistant City Manager for Health and Environment should:

- a. identify relevant baseline training and guidance for how City staff will address mental health-related encounters,
- b. determine which City departments and staff that interact with the community could benefit from this training and guidance, and
- c. ensure identified staff receive the training and guidance.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan: The Assistant City Manager for Health and Environment will partner with the Local Mental Health Authority to expand current efforts to offer Mental First Aid Training to City of Austin staff and to provide guidance on what other local training opportunities will be available. The Assistant City Manager will also explore opportunities for collaboration with Departments that report to the Assistant City Manager of Public Safety.

The Assistant City Manager will work with Department Heads to identify and prioritize programs and staff that will benefit from additional training resources. Human Resources staff of identified departments will assist with the development of policies and procedures regarding training requirements and tracking.

Proposed Implementation Date: June 30, 2020

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In order to know where mental health-related resources are needed and address community accessibility, the Assistant City Manager for Health and Environment should:

- a. engage with external service providers to determine if this level of reporting is feasible for referrals from City staff and, if so, pursue those reporting requirements in current and future contracts or agreements or, if this information is not available,
- b. ensure that departments have a method to count and track the number and location for mental health-related encounters while respecting the privacy concerns involving health-related information, and
- c. use available information to identify opportunities where funding and services can make the greatest impact in addressing accessibility of mental health services for the community.

Management Response: Agree

Proposed Implementation Plan: The Assistant City Manager for Health and Environment will engage with external mental health service providers to explore the possibility of formalizing a referral system with prioritized City programs. Data to be captured will include client demographics, including zip codes, as well as referral outcomes (i.e. did referred client enter into care). Agreed upon systems would then be included in the scope of work for the external mental health service providers that are funded by the City. If this approach is not feasible, the Assistant City Manager will work with Department Directors responsible for prioritized programs to develop an internal process to track the number of referrals as well as client demographics (i.e., zip code, gender identify, etc.).

Information will be used to guide future Requests For Applications for Mental Health Services.

Proposed Implementation Date: November 30, 2020

Scope

Current City activities related to mental health services, excluding public safety departments. Specifically, we engaged with staff in the following departments that frequently interact with the public: Austin 3-1-1, Austin Convention Center, Austin Public Health, Austin Public Library, Building Services, and Parks and Recreation.

Methodology

To complete this audit, we performed the following steps:

- interviewed staff from Austin 3-1-1, Austin Convention Center, Austin Public Health, Austin Public Library, Building Services, and Parks and Recreation;
- interviewed staff from Integral Care;
- reviewed City policies and procedures related to mental health services;
- analyzed City contracts and grants related to mental health services;
- analyzed Austin Strategic Direction 2023 indicators and metrics related to mental health services;
- reviewed the “Recommendations for First Responder Mental Health Calls for Service” report developed by The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute for Texas;
- evaluated IT-related risks associated with mental health services;
- evaluated fraud-related risks associated with access to mental health services; and
- evaluated internal controls related to access to mental health services.

Audit Standards

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. We conduct performance audits to review aspects of a City service or program and provide recommendations for improvement.

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