Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Vision

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a critical role to play in leading public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. All children need access to mental health and substance abuse screening and assessment and a full array of evidence-based therapeutic services to appropriately address their mental health and substance use disorder needs. These services should be provided in the context of the medical home. Pediatricians, both primary care and subspecialists, must be properly supported to be able to provide mental and behavioral health services, particularly when access to mental health providers in the community or in co-located settings are unavailable. Reduction in barriers to and promotion of mental and behavioral health integration into the pediatric primary care setting is essential to children receiving the screening, prevention, and treatment services they need. The pediatric mental health workforce crisis in the United States necessitates a greater role for primary care.

Recommended Administrative Actions

Ensure strong leadership. The next administration should ensure that the SAMHSA has a strong leadership team. That team should include physicians who provide mental health care, substance use disorder treatment, and pediatric primary care. In order for SAMHSA to fulfill its mission, the agency needs physician leadership that is attuned to existing pediatric practice and systemic barriers to screening and treatment for children.

Build effective partnerships. Given how pervasive, yet under-reourced, mental and behavioral health concerns are in children, SAMHSA should meaningfully engage its partners in the medical provider community to assist the agency in partnering on programs and initiatives that seek to enhance evidence-based interventions.

Expand treatment of substance use disorders. SAMHSA must make a shift to a greater emphasis on evidence-based treatments for substance abuse, such as medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for opioid use disorder. MAT is currently underused during adolescence even though it is a critical time for substance abuse intervention. The agency should also be prepared to respond to the liberalization of state marijuana laws that is contributing to rising levels of marijuana use among children. The administration should also encourage the use of screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment (SBIRT) in the clinical setting to reduce underage drinking and other risky substance usage.

Recommended Congressional Actions

Reauthorize the Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking Act. The Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking (STOP) Act (S. 728/H.R. 1717 in the 114th Congress) is the primary law that directs federal efforts to reduce underage drinking. Congress must reauthorize this Act, and include a funding authorization for a new program to train pediatric health care providers on adolescent SBIRT for alcohol and other drug use.

Recognize infant-early childhood mental health in mental health policy. In considering comprehensive mental health legislation, Congress should include provisions to support programs for infant and early childhood mental health promotion, intervention, and treatment, including multigenerational therapy and other services that support the caregiving relationship.

Funding Priorities

Opioid epidemic. The federal government must greatly expand funding for its efforts to get the opioid epidemic under control. Increasing the use of substance abuse SBIRT and MAT for adolescents must be a crucial priority.

Mental health integration in pediatric primary care settings. SAMHSA should fund programs that promote the integration of mental and behavioral health in pediatric primary care settings. The agency should partner with professional organizations that provide specialized, developmentally appropriate, mental and behavioral health care to children on the design and implementation of such programs.

Adolescent research in mental health and substance abuse treatment. Although there is a significant amount of data on evidence-based mental health and substance abuse treatment for adults, much less is known about safe and effective treatments for adolescents. Funding must prioritize more research on effective treatment modalities for adolescents and young adults.
About this Document

This document is an excerpt from Blueprint for Children: How the Next President Can Build a Foundation for a Healthy Future (http://aap.org/blueprint), which was produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics in September 2016 and has also been endorsed by the following organizations: the Academic Pediatric Association, the American Pediatric Society, America’s Promise Alliance, the Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs, Family Voices, the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, the Pediatric Policy Council, the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, the Society for Pediatric Research and ZERO TO THREE.