

Access to Mental Health Services



Objective

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

Background

City Council identified access to mental health services as a priority. It was one of ten Strategic Direction 2023 indicators where Council wanted to see the most improvement over the next few years.

A 2018 community survey indicated about 23% of Austin residents were satisfied with their access to quality mental health care they can afford.

Our office has done previous work in the area of mental health and its impact on the community. 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.

What We Found

The City funds external providers of mental health services, including the designated mental health authority for the Austin area, Integral Care. 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.

Coordinate Approach

- No standard City definition for “mental health”
- Inconsistent approach to mental health referrals and trainings within and among City departments

Identify Needs

- No formal needs assessment specific to mental health issues
- Departments do not formally track referrals to identify needs, mainly due to privacy concerns

Track Referrals

- Inconsistent referral tracking by City departments
- Austin 3-1-1 tracks calls by department, not by topic area such as mental health
- Integral Care does not track referral data by City location and is not currently required to do so

Addressing these issues should help the City know if referrals are effective at connecting individuals to services. It can also identify locations that have a demonstrated need for preventative, on-site services.

We also noted that current City metrics may not show if the City is achieving its goal to make quality mental health services accessible to the community.

What We Recommend

The Assistant City Manager for Health and Environment should:

1. ensure more consistency in addressing mental health-related encounters with members of the community by providing appropriate City staff members with relevant training and guidance and
2. collect and use data on City mental health service referrals to know where resources are needed and better address community accessibility.