



Advocating for mental health on Capitol Hill

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

As one of Georgia's state-designated behavioral health authorities, Highland Rivers Health consistently advocates for policies and funding that support quality mental health and substance use treatment services in our region and across the state.

Our agency is in almost constant contact with leaders of the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to keep them up-to-date about the needs of the individuals and communities we serve, and how state policies can continue to enhance local services.

We also meet regularly with state legislators that represent the counties served by Highland Rivers – before and during each year's legislative session – to advocate for specific bills and legislative initiatives that will increase funding for and access to behavioral health services in our communities.

Recently, Highland Rivers took our message of advocacy even further, all the way to Washington, D.C., for the National Council for Behavioral Health's 2017 Hill Day. There we joined more than 500 behavioral health providers, advocates and individuals living in recovery to call for increased funding for mental health and substance use treatment directly with members of Congress.

Approximately 20 individuals from Georgia attended Hill Day, including representatives from other community services boards like Highland Rivers, the Georgia Association of Community Services Boards (GACSB), mental health advocates and individuals living in recovery. Our state group met with all 16 members of Georgia's congressional delegation or their staff members. Representatives from Highland Rivers met with staff of Congressman Tom Graves, Congressman Barry Loudermilk, Senator Johnny Isakson, and directly with Congressman Rick Allen.

The National Council identified five legislative priorities for which Hill Day attendees were asked to advocate with their member of Congress:

- Strengthening the Addiction Treatment Workforce Act (S. 1453). This bill would add addiction treatment facilities to National Health Service Corps sites where treatment professionals would be eligible for loan forgiveness, attracting more treatment professionals to underserved areas.

- Mental Health Access Improvement Act of 2017 (H.R. 3032). This legislation would allow licensed marriage and family therapists and licensed mental health counselors to bill Medicare for their services, increasing access to mental health services for older adults.
- Improving Access to Behavioral Health Information Technology Act (S. 1732/H.R. 3331). Seeking to enhance efficiency and care coordination, this bill would support wider adoption of electronic health records by behavioral health providers.
- Excellence in Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Expansion Act. This initiative seeks to expand a previous two-year demonstration project to expand access to behavioral health care by establishing standards for Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics and setting a Medicaid reimbursement rate that adequately supports costs.
- FY 2018 Mental Health and Substance Use Appropriations. The behavioral health system includes many elements and initiatives, all of which are critical. Specific appropriations support federal agencies (such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services), as well as research, education and funding for programs at the state and local levels.

Highland Rivers is proud to be an advocate for high quality and affordable behavioral health services locally, on the state level and nationally. If support a strong mental health and addiction treatment system in Georgia and the U.S., please contact your representatives in Congress and make your voice heard too.