

## **Pandemic causes rise in mental health care demand and future models for accessibility**

Two years into COVID-19, the pandemic's effects on mental health are still unfolding in the healthcare industry. Dr. Matthew State, a youth psychiatrist and human geneticist based out of the University of California San Francisco, spoke in a Monday press conference about how telehealth provides significant access to mental health care, but demand still outpaces supply.

“There's such a huge shortage of providers across the country, such uneven services,” he said, “and the ability to provide telehealth offers at least a glimmer of hope there to increase reach.”

State, whose research focuses on gene discovery for childhood onset disorders like autism spectrum disorders, Tourette disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, said providing access to mental health care was a major challenge prior to the pandemic. And access is crucial — over half of adults with a mental illness do not receive treatment, according to [this year's national survey](#) by community-based nonprofit Mental Health America.

Demand for mental health services has increased dramatically. At the onset of the pandemic in May 2020, [suspected suicide attempts among adolescents increased](#) by over 50% for girls and almost 4% for boys, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Unfortunately, there are not enough providers to meet patients' needs. State said the waitlist for the general psychiatric clinic at UCSF takes a year to get off.

“Our clinical services have been pedal to the metal since the start of the pandemic, with really significant year-over-year increases in the services that we provide,” he said, “and yet our waitlists are essentially closed.”

Stigma is typically a barrier to treatment, but State said he is hopeful it is reducing thanks to more celebrities speaking up. Simone Biles and Michael Phelps, for example, talked openly about their mental health struggles following the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics.

“It feels like there may be the beginning of a tipping point societally in the acceptance of addressing mental health issues,” State said.

State's clinical practice largely serves marginalized populations in the community. He said there's a strong connection between poverty, homelessness and serious mental illness. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that [more than one quarter of homeless adults](#) in shelters have serious mental illnesses.

Part of the university's outreach efforts to that population include purchasing cell phones for hundreds of homeless people with mental illnesses with a million-dollar gift it received early in the pandemic. They used the phones to stay in touch with the population.

Three-fourths of the recipients no longer had the phones after the first few months, so the university started a digital literacy program. It just piloted an app targeted toward treating substance abuse among the homeless population.

“We feel like it's really important to take care of people one person at a time and experience the humanity of this,” State said. “But at the same time, we want to understand what kind of models of care can work. Through the course of the pandemic we've been experimenting with trying increasingly to use digital technology.”