

COVID-19's impact on mental health has increased the need for care at UCSF. Can it meet demand?

The Langley Porter Psychiatric Hospital and Clinics at the University of California San Francisco has “essentially closed” its waitlist for new patients amid surges in demand due to the pandemic, Clinic President Dr. Matthew State said at a press conference Tuesday.

The current waitlist for outpatient treatment and for an autism evaluation is more than a year long, State said.

“We are maxed out,” State said.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, [40% of adults in the country have reported symptoms of anxiety or depression](#) since the start of the pandemic, compared to 11% in 2019.

With this increased incidence, the need for mental health care has “increased dramatically,” not just in San Francisco, but across the entire country, State said.

“The demand went from overwhelming to beyond overwhelming,” he said.

UCSF's [Wavefront DBT Clinic](#), which treats high-risk adolescents experiencing depression, suicidal ideation and self harm, has also faced increased demand. According to the CDC, emergency room visits for suspected suicide attempts among adolescent girls between February and March 2021 [increased by 50%](#) compared to 2019.

Since October, the clinic's waitlist has been closed, said Director Esme Shaller. The current wait time is between nine months to a year.

“I have phone calls with crying parents who are terrified about their kid dying, very justifiably,” Shaller said. “And I have to tell them, either ‘The waitlist is closed’ or ‘I can help their kid in a year.’ If your 14 year old just made two suicide attempts, you don't want to wait a year to get care.”

These delays in treatment are not new to State and Shaller, however.

“We've been struggling with this for a long time,” State said.

In the Bay Area in particular, the high cost of living and low reimbursement rates has made UCSF one of the only places in northern California that takes commercial insurance, Shaller said.

Additionally, the threat of a therapist shortage has long loomed over California. A [2018 study from the Healthforce Center at UCSF](#) found that the state's number of psychiatrists was

projected to decrease by 34% between 2016 and 2028 — a prediction issued before the emergence of a pandemic.

Because of provider burnout, Shaller is struggling to find applicants for open positions, as are her colleagues at Columbia University and Northwestern University, she said.

Now, workforce development has become a major focus at UCSF, State said.

“There’s a renewed emphasis across the board in how to think creatively about allying with nursing and social work and peer therapists to be able to do a better job delivering care,” he said.

Telehealth has increased UCSF’s ability to see new patients, making it one “silver lining” of the pandemic, State said. Patient volume in the UCSF system usually grows by 3% to 5% each year, but over the pandemic — without any changes in staff — the clinic saw a 40% increase in visits.

“The ability to provide telehealth offers at least a glimmer of hope there to increase reach,” State said.