



TO: Senate Ways and Means Committee
Sen. Rick Billinger, Chair
J.R. Claeys, Vice Chair

FROM: Jennifer Goehring RN, BSN, MHCL
VP of Nursing and Operations, Ascension Via Christi St. Joseph

SUBJECT: Funding for Inpatient Behavioral Health Services included in Substitute for H.B. 2007

DATE: March 5, 2025

My name is Jennifer Goehring and I am the Chief Nursing Officer of Ascension Via Christi St. Joseph Hospital in Wichita. As a nonprofit healthcare organization, our mission is to serve all, with special attention to the underserved and vulnerable. Across Kansas, Ascension Via Christi provided more than \$62 million in community benefit and care for persons living in poverty in fiscal year 2024.

We are requesting your support of \$10 million in supplemental funding included in Sub. for H.B. 2007, that is critically important for addressing the shortage of behavioral health beds in Kansas. On behalf of Via Christi - thank you for your partnership last year when, after hearing the need, the legislature appropriated \$10 million in supplemental funding to support private inpatient adult behavioral health beds in Kansas. It is important to note that Sub. for H.B. 2007 also transfers \$8.7 million in interest from the Health Care Access Improvement Program (HCAIP) to the state general fund to offset the \$10 million for hospitals providing inpatient behavioral health services for adults.

This shortage is a serious issue that is having a ripple effect across our hospitals and healthcare systems. Ascension Via Christi St. Joseph admits hundreds of behavioral health patients per month, accounting for nearly 30 percent of the public inpatient behavioral health beds available across Kansas.

In 2024, we had 3,439 behavioral health admissions with an average length of stay of 13.99 days. The specific demographics for each area is: Adolescent 5.21 days, Adult 10.9 days, and Geriatric 25.85 days.

In each of the past three fiscal years, we have averaged between \$3.5 to \$6.2 million in annual losses for behavioral health services – even after accounting for the provision of Disproportionate Share Hospital (DSH) and Uncompensated Care Pool (UCC) funding designed to help offset our losses. It's important to note that the annual losses incurred in our behavioral health unit are in addition to millions of dollars' worth of uncompensated care provided every year. In 2024, St. Joseph recorded \$2.6 million in uncompensated care.

These annual losses are unsustainable. We need your continued help. More importantly, our state's residents suffering from mental health disorders need your help. Our state's patients cannot afford to lose any more providers of this critical care.

The inpatient behavioral health supplemental funding appropriated in 2024 has been extremely helpful to Ascension Via Christi in not only mitigating our annual financial loss under this service line, but also to help sustain the number of beds we can keep open for the patients we serve.

Around the country, the upward trend in patients presenting with behavioral health conditions continues. According to the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchasers Coalitions, the number of American workers screening positive for PTSD is up 136% since pre-pandemic and depression is up 63% (nationalalliancehealth.org, 2022). The National Alliance on Mental Health states that 1 in 4 U.S. adults experienced mental illness in 2020, with 1 in 20 experiencing what is defined as severe mental illness. But only 64% of those experiencing severe mental illness received treatment (nami.org/mhstats, 2022).

The high volume of uninsured patients requiring care, and the increasing complexity of patients' behavioral health needs, have resulted in an increasing number of patients being boarded in the emergency department while they await placement in behavioral health department beds.

At St. Joseph, our 29-bed emergency department sees more than 500 behavioral health patients each month, creating significant challenges for patients, staff, and our healthcare system. The environment is particularly volatile, with our team experiencing an average of 1.5 staff assaults daily. This reality makes it difficult to hire and retain staff.

Thanks to the support of the Governor and the 2023 Legislature, St. Joseph was awarded \$22 million through the SPARK process to bring needed enhancements to our emergency department. This funding will enable us to add 20 beds to our existing facility and create an 11-bed psychiatric observation unit designed specifically for behavioral health patients.

While this project is not meant to increase the number of patients, it will significantly enhance our ability to care for the current volume of patients we see every day. At the heart of this project is our commitment to provide a safer, more secure, and more supportive environment for everyone we serve. This project is currently underway and is expected to be completed by mid-2026.

We also appreciate the increase in Medicaid hospital outpatient base rates the legislature approved last year, and ask this committee to consider the Kansas Hospital Association's request for an additional increase to these base rates.

This additional state funding appropriated by the legislature last year is helping to sustain our behavioral bed capacity, as well as providing the resources needed to care for more patients more quickly and effectively. Continuing this vital funding will strengthen communities by improving public health outcomes and ensuring the long-term financial stability of our behavioral health system.

I respectfully request the committee approve these important funding requests.