

Leveraging Cal-MAP to Increase Access to Youth Mental Health Support through Primary Care Settings

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Two parents are at a primary care appointment with their newborn child.

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When Nancy Netherland, a Berkeley parent and longtime behavioral health professional, set out to find mental health care for her child, she assumed her experience and connections would help her navigate the process. Instead, she found herself facing long waitlists, a complex referral system, and a process that felt overwhelming.

“I have high levels of privilege—professional, racial, social—and I still couldn’t get my son the care he needed,” said Nancy. “If I can’t do it, what happens to families who don’t speak English, who don’t have that access?” Even with years of experience in behavioral health, Nancy said navigating care for her own children felt impossible. “It’s just not a system that’s easy to access,” she said.

“Even when you know where to look, it’s like being dropped into a maze with no map. Every step forward comes with more paperwork, more waiting, and fewer answers.”

Her story reflects the reality for many California families; navigating behavioral health care for children can be difficult and time-consuming, particularly when physical and behavioral health systems operate separately. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, up to 75% of primary-care visits involve behavioral or mental-health components. Without the tools or training to address complex behavioral health problems, many young children go un-diagnosed or mis-diagnosed.



A parent and child meet with a primary care provider in a clinical setting.

Recognizing the need to integrate behavioral health services with primary care, the State of California has begun breaking down siloes in an effort to create a comprehensive, “whole child” system.

Through a new statewide program, the California Child and Adolescent Mental Health Access Portal (Cal-MAP), primary care physicians can connect directly with behavioral health experts during their patients’ visits for immediate consultations.

For Nancy and her family, that kind of coordination can be life changing. Her two teenagers, both former foster children, have complex medical and behavioral health needs, including histories of trauma and chronic illness. Early intervention was crucial, finding it through traditional systems proved burdensome and unnecessarily prohibitive. Parents like Nancy are often forced to navigate a seemingly endless string of referrals, ping-ponging between providers and insurers to find care for their kids.

“We wanted to do prevention to build resiliency, but the system wasn’t built for that,” she said. “We couldn’t find a way in. There were no resources, no referrals, and no preventive care, until there was a diagnosis.”



A parent and child discuss care options with their primary care provider .

That changed when her pediatrician was able to coordinate care in real time with a psychiatric nurse practitioner through Cal-MAP, ensuring Nancy’s children could continue seeing their trusted pediatrician while knowing the pediatrician had access to expert behavioral health support to holistically meet her kids’ needs. Nancy, who was recently elected as the incoming Chair of the Medi-Cal Children’s Health Advisory Panel ([MCHAP](#)), said seeing Cal-MAP in action strengthened her belief that California is moving in the right direction toward a more integrated, member-centered system.

“It was the first time I felt like someone really saw my kids,” she said. “Their doctor could look at their physical and mental health together, not separately.”

The Solution: Cal-MAP

Cal-MAP is a free statewide provider-to-provider consultation and education program designed to help California’s primary care providers meet the behavioral health needs of children and youth ages 0-25. Through a secure online portal, pediatricians, family doctors, and nurse practitioners can connect in real time with child psychiatrists, psychologists, and licensed clinical social workers for one-on-one guidance on behavioral health diagnosis, treatment planning, and care coordination. Providers can also access educational resources, continuing education credits, and toolkits to strengthen their ability to better support youth behavioral health within their own practice. Cal-MAP is part of California’s Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), which aims to make it easier for children and youth to get help early—in trusted spaces and without

stigma. The initiative aims to help all children, but is especially focused on expanding culturally responsive care to children and families in rural and underserved areas. To implement Cal-MAP, the Department of Health Care Services partners with the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and their team of experts.

“A significant proportion of primary care visits involve one or more mental health concerns,” said Dr. Petra Steinbuchel, who directs the Cal-MAP program. “Through consultation, training, resources, and referral navigation, Cal-MAP supports primary care providers so that youth and caregivers can access the right care, at the right time, and in the right place.”

Dr. Steinbuchel describes the program’s approach using a simple image: an iceberg. “What you see above the surface is behavior,” she said. “But below that are the drivers, trauma, unmet needs, cultural context, [and] family stress. When providers learn to look deeper, they stop asking, ‘What’s wrong with this child?’ and start asking, ‘What happened to them, and how can we help?’”



Dr. Javay Ross, Pediatrician at UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland, and Dr. Petra Steinbuchel

Each consultation gives providers access to specialists who can help interpret symptoms, recommend treatment options, and identify culturally responsive approaches. But the learning doesn’t stop there. Cal-MAP consultants are able to support over 50% of cases providers call about to manage their patients’ behavioral health needs within primary care. Other patients may need a higher level of care, and Cal-MAP helps identify this with the providers, too. Through ongoing case discussions, education, training, resources, and referral navigation, Cal-MAP helps pediatricians and family doctors deepen their understanding of mental and behavioral

health concerns, including the impact of trauma, neurodiversity, and cultural context—topics that are often underemphasized in medical training.

Thanks to her pediatrician's connection to Cal-MAP, Nancy's child was able to stay in care with a trusted provider who reflected her child's experience and identity. "My kids are not the same race as I am," said Nancy. "So, having providers who understand the cultural pieces, the racial trauma, the biases that show up in diagnosis means everything. For my son to sit with someone who looked like him and identified as neurodivergent, it changed his world."

This is the kind of integrated care model that CYBHI, and programs like Cal-MAP, aim to make the norm. Cal-MAP is now a part of California's Pediatric Mental Health Access Program (PMHCA), a national model in all 50 states that increases access to mental health care through multi-pronged support and technical assistance. Most commonly applied in primary care, the model is also applied in schools, and in meeting needs for specific groups, including during early childhood and perinatal phases, justice-involved youth and those with developmental and substance use concerns. By breaking down silos that have long separated physical and behavioral health, Cal-MAP is helping families get support earlier and closer to home. Research shows this model works: a 2019 RAND national study found that children in states with statewide Child Psychiatry Access Programs (CPAPs) were significantly more likely to receive behavioral health services than children in states without such programs (Stein, 2019).

Building Capacity Across the System

The impact isn't just resonating with families like Nancy's, it's also being felt by providers who are using Cal-MAP in their daily practice. Dr. Billy Burrough, a pediatrician at UCSF Beniof Children's Hospital, sees firsthand how access challenges affect young people seeking behavioral health support.

“Of all the things my patients are coming for, mental health is probably one of the highest needs,” said Dr. Burrough. “We’ve always had a tough time making that connection to a therapist or getting a family to see a psychiatrist. It can be a lengthy wait time for many of our patients, not to mention insurance barriers that make it really challenging. Since I started using Cal-MAP, it’s been a nice discovery. Now I can get guidance quickly and help families sooner.”

For Dr. Steinbuchel, Cal-MAP’s impact goes beyond any single consultation. The program is transforming the way primary care providers think about behavioral health, helping them recognize early warning signs, respond with compassion, and connect families to care before a crisis hits.

“When we talk about Cal-MAP, we’re really talking about building capacity across the system,” said Dr. Steinbuchel. “Our goal isn’t just to respond to one question or one patient. It’s to help providers feel confident, supported, and equipped to care



Dr. Billy Burrough, Pediatrician at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland

for kids’ mental health as part of their everyday work, and the feedback we hear repeatedly is similar to this quote: ‘this was so helpful and thorough... and will help me not only now with this patient, but in my future practice with [similar] patients.’”

That shift in perspective is already making a difference. Providers who once referred families out for every behavioral health concern are now able to offer immediate interventions or work in tandem with Cal-MAP consultants to determine next steps.

“Being able to access a psychiatrist, talk through treatment plans, and then carry those out with my patients has been really meaningful and rewarding,” said Dr. Burrough. “Knowing that there’s this group of child and adolescent psychiatrists out there who have our back has given me more confidence in caring for my patients in our primary care settings.”

The success of programs like Cal-MAP signals a broader shift toward a more integrated, compassionate system of care, one that meets families where they are. For Nancy, that shift meant her children had access to a provider who truly treated them holistically. For California, it represents a blueprint for how primary care and behavioral health care can work hand in hand to support the next generation. As CYBHI continues to transform youth access to behavioral health, Cal-MAP stands as proof that when systems are designed for connection instead of complexity, families don't just find help, they find hope.

To learn more about Cal-MAP visit, cal-map.org



The Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) is a flagship component of Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health and historic investment by the State of California to expand access and behavioral health support for children, youth, and families.