



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2026-2029

Behavioral Health Services Act Integrated Plan

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



Letter from the Behavioral Health Director



To Our Community Members, Partners, and Colleagues,

It is my privilege to present the Santa Cruz County Behavioral Health Services Act Integrated Plan (BHSA IP) for the upcoming three-year cycle. We share this plan at a moment of significant fiscal uncertainty for behavioral health systems across California and the nation. While the plan has been developed using the best available revenue estimates, we anticipate the need to adjust—and potentially reduce—components of the plan as we learn more about the short- and long-term State and Federal fiscal impacts that will influence our local resources.

As we prepare for possible decreases in revenue, we also anticipate an increase in demand for behavioral health services. More Santa Cruz County residents will rely on publicly funded care as other avenues for services become less accessible or affordable. This creates a challenging landscape: fewer resources paired with greater need. We remain committed to responding thoughtfully, transparently, and in partnership with our community as we navigate these conditions.

The development of this BHSA Integrated Plan has been guided by the voices of the community we serve. I want to offer my sincere thanks to everyone who participated in our robust planning process. Your insights, your lived experience, and your ongoing engagement shaped this plan in meaningful ways. Across all discussion groups, surveys, and listening sessions, one theme resonated consistently: accessible, equitable care remains a top priority for Santa Cruz County. This plan reflects that priority.

I would also like to extend heartfelt appreciation to our Behavioral Health staff and contracted provider partners. Their commitment to serving this community—through workforce shortages, funding uncertainties, and growing demand—has remained steadfast. Their work ensures that residents continue to receive essential support, treatment, and connection during times of stability and during times of strain. This system relies on their expertise, compassion, adaptability, and dedication.

Looking ahead, we know that flexibility will be essential. As fiscal realities shift, we will revisit our priorities, maintain open communication, and work collaboratively to ensure that we continue to provide the highest level of care possible for our community.

Thank you again for your partnership, trust, and participation in shaping this plan. Together, we remain committed to building a healthier, more resilient Santa Cruz County.

With appreciation,

Dr. Marni R. Sandoval

Behavioral Health Director | County of Santa Cruz

» Introduction

As a result of California’s voters passing Proposition 1 (Prop 1) in March 2024, the Behavioral Health Services Act (BHSA) is replacing the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), which has funded county mental health services since 2004. BHSA introduces significant changes in the allowable uses of Prop 1 funds as well as fundamental shifts in how funds are distributed by the state and how County Behavioral Health departments can use them. These changes require counties to realign programs, budgets, and operations to meet new state-defined requirements.

BHSA requires all county Behavioral Health Departments to submit a three-year Integrated Plan (IP) for Behavioral Health Services and Outcomes outlining intended use of funds and a budget for behavioral health programs administered, beginning with Fiscal Years (FY) 2026–2029 (July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2029).

» Community Program Planning Process

Community engagement was a critical part of the development of this first Integrated Plan. The Santa Cruz County Behavioral Health Division (SCCBHD) conducted a community planning process designed to ensure that local residents and community partners have voice in identifying the needs and priorities of the Behavioral Health system at the local level. Input was gathered through community meetings, listening sessions, surveys, stakeholder workgroups, and partner consultations. Participants included individuals with lived experience of mental health and substance use challenges, family members and caregivers, behavioral health providers, school partners, youth advocates, housing providers, justice-system representatives, culturally specific community organizations, and other local partners.

Across all engagement activities, community members consistently emphasized several priorities. Residents expressed the need for behavioral health services that are easier to access, more culturally responsive, and better coordinated across systems. Participants also highlighted the importance of youth mental health supports, timely crisis response, housing stability and services that prevent people from cycling through hospitals, jails, and homelessness.

The Integrated Plan reflects this feedback by prioritizing accessible care, early intervention, and housing interventions for people with severe behavioral health conditions, and coordinated support for individuals with the most complex needs.



The Integrated Plan was created by the Behavioral Health Division of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency. Community members and partners provided input to inform the development of the Plan through the required Community Program Planning Process.

» Barriers to Accessing Care

Although Santa Cruz County offers a broad range of services, many residents still face difficulties accessing care. Specialty mental health service use remains lower than statewide averages, indicating that some residents who need care are not receiving it. Barriers include language differences, cultural stigma, transportation limitations, provider shortages, complex eligibility rules, and challenges navigating multiple systems.

Data also show disparities in access among Hispanic and Latino residents, Spanish-speaking residents, young adults, and some older adults. These inequities highlight the need for culturally responsive outreach, bilingual services, and simplified pathways into care.

» Supporting Housing Stability for Individuals with Serious Mental Illness or Substance Use Disorders

Santa Cruz County continues to experience high rates of homelessness overall and affordable housing demand exceeds the local supply. For community members to receive housing supportive services from Behavioral Health, individuals must also meet eligibility criteria for County Behavioral Health services as a part of the specialty mental health and substance use disorder behavioral health plan requirements.

SCCBHD continues to work in close partnership with Housing for Health and other housing providers to support Behavioral Health clients in finding and maintaining stable housing. Strengthening housing coordination and expanding supportive housing programs for community members with serious mental illness or substance use remain critical priorities.



» Crisis System Pressures

Behavioral health crises require immediate response and safe alternatives to hospitalization or incarceration. Youth crisis services have historically been limited in the county, often requiring young people to seek care outside the county or in emergency departments.

Expanding local crisis options is necessary to ensure timely intervention and reduce unnecessary hospital stays as well as keep clients close to their families and communities as a part of their recovery.



» Institutional Care and Step-Down Services

Santa Cruz County currently lacks sufficient step-down treatment facilities that support individuals transitioning from higher levels of psychiatric or institutional care back into community settings. This gap limits the County's ability to provide appropriate levels of care and can delay recovery and community reintegration. Expanding step-down facilities is critical to ensuring residents receive care in the least restrictive environment possible while promoting stability, recovery, and more efficient use of hospital and institutional resources.

» Workforce Shortages

Behavioral health providers face workforce shortages that limit service capacity and increase length of time to available appointments. Recruiting and retaining qualified professionals remains a major challenge.

Major Strategies & Investments (2026–2029)



Improving Access Through a Centralized Entry System

SCCBHD will strengthen its centralized Behavioral Health Access Team to provide a clear and simple entry point for residents seeking services. This team offers bilingual screening, clinical assessment, referrals, and care coordination for both mental health and substance use services. A centralized approach reduces confusion, increase timely appointments, and ensures residents are connected to the most appropriate level of care.

Expanding School Linked and Youth Services

Youth mental health remains a top priority. SCCBHD will continue to support school based services and Behavioral Health Navigator programs that help students and families connect to care early. Early intervention services will address anxiety, depression, trauma, substance use, and family stressors before conditions escalate.

New Youth Crisis Programs

SCCBHD is investing in new youth crisis stabilization and short-term residential programs to provide safe, appropriate alternatives to emergency rooms and inpatient hospitalization. These programs will allow young people to receive care closer to home and stabilize in supportive therapeutic settings.



Strengthening Housing Interventions for Behavioral Health Consumers

Stable housing is essential for recovery and long-term wellbeing. SCCBHD will continue to invest in integrated treatment programs that combine behavioral health care with housing navigation and stabilization services. Multidisciplinary teams will help individuals experiencing homelessness secure housing while receiving ongoing treatment and recovery support.

Major Strategies & Investments (2026–2029), continued

Enhancing Community Based Crisis Response

Mobile Crisis Response teams will continue providing field-based intervention, deescalation, and service linkage 24 hours a day. Expanded crisis stabilization services will offer short term therapeutic care that prevents unnecessary hospitalizations and supports recovery in community settings.

Expanding Substance Use Treatment and Recovery Services

SCCBHD will continue providing substance use disorder services, including outpatient care, intensive treatment programs, residential services, withdrawal management, medications for addiction treatment, peer support, and recovery services. Prevention and early intervention programs will focus on youth and high-risk populations.

Supporting Justice Involved Individuals

Collaborative programs between behavioral health and justice partners will continue to divert individuals with severe behavioral health conditions away from incarceration and toward treatment. Specialized teams will provide intensive services, reentry planning, and coordination with probation, courts, and law enforcement agencies.

Strengthening Family and Child Welfare Partnerships

SCCBHD will continue working closely with child welfare partners to support children and families experiencing trauma, instability, and behavioral health challenges. Family-centered services help prevent out-of-home placements and support reunification when safe and appropriate.



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Commitment to Equity

Equity is central to Santa Cruz County's behavioral health strategy. The County is committed to reducing disparities by expanding bilingual services, partnering with trusted community organizations, improving outreach to underserved populations, and using data to identify inequities in access and outcomes.

Culturally responsive care recognizes the diverse backgrounds, languages, experiences, and identities of community members. Services will continue evolving to ensure that all residents feel respected, understood, and supported.

Looking Ahead

The BHSI Integrated Plan provides a community-informed roadmap for supporting Santa Cruz County's behavioral health system over the next three years. Healthcare and Behavioral Health Departments are currently facing many policy and financial pressures amidst the rapidly changing national and state policy climates. This plan was created with the intention of supporting and sustaining the operations and critical mandated clinical services of Santa Cruz County's Behavioral Health system.

Continued partnership with residents, service providers, and community organizations will remain essential as Santa Cruz County adapts to changing needs and fiscal conditions. SCCBHD remains committed to community collaboration, transparency, and stakeholder partnership, to ensure that Santa Cruz County residents have access to behavioral health services to support their well-being.