



# DIRECTOR'S NEWSLETTER: Access Call Center



As the initial point of contact for individuals seeking behavioral health care, the Access team specializes in making a positive first impression. We understand that reaching out for help can be challenging, so having compassionate individuals on the other end of the line can make a significant difference. Once at BHRS, Access connects clients to appropriate providers and special services needed throughout their journey. By leading with care, Access leaves a lasting impression that can transform an intimidating experience into a supportive and welcoming one.

## It Starts with a Call

The BHRS Access team, which includes the Access Call Center, the Outpatient Utilization Management (UM) team and Specialty Private Provider Network (SPPN), is committed to providing excellent customer service, timely assistance and improving entry to behavioral health care in San Mateo County. The Call Center is the main point of entry for Medi-Cal beneficiaries in SMC seeking non-emergency mental health and substance use services. The team, many of whom have worked in their roles for many years, collaborates to ensure callers are referred to the appropriate level of care or resources in a timely and supportive manner. In addition to county residents, the team manages calls from treatment providers and short-term treatment settings like hospitals and psychiatric emergency services (PES). Referrals are also received from primary care providers, BHRS providers, Kaiser, Health Plan of San Mateo and other service agencies. For a resident calling to seek support, the initial process begins with their call:

A call is received to the Access Call Center, **1-800-686-0101**, open 24/7 and available in multilingual support.

Clients with qualifying insurance are screened over the phone by clinicians to determine next step of care and appropriate referrals.

Clients identified to have mild to moderate symptoms are referred to Health Plan of San Mateo, Kaiser Medi-Cal or community agencies.

Clients identified to have significant mental health impairments are referred to BHRS clinics and programs.

Clients in need of substance use services are referred to BHRS Alcohol and Other Drugs Services (AOD) outpatient agencies and BHRS residential team.



In 2024, the Access administrative team (four staff) answered over **12,000** calls. The (five) clinical staff screened and referred over **7,000** San Mateo residents to behavioral health care and processed about **2,300** written provider requests.

## The Specialty Private Provider Network Matches Clients With Care

The Specialty Private Provider Network, SPPN, connects clients with severe mental health impairments to contracted therapists in the community. The SPPN helps with increasing therapy capacity to serve more BHRS clients, especially when specialized services are required or when a particular expertise is needed. The SPPN will work to match the client with a provider in the network.

The SPPN program currently oversees 53 individual therapist contracts and 5 agency contracts. The team handles various responsibilities, including outreach and recruitment of providers, training and providing ongoing consultation. They ensure quality control, navigate complicated consultations, grievances and oversee the approval of services. Additionally, they review clinical documentation to determine client's needs for outpatient therapy, match clients with appropriate providers and facilitate the renewal of therapy for clients who need ongoing treatment.

In 2024, The SPPN program matched 350 new clients to SPPN providers and authorized annual treatment renewals for 325 clients. There are currently 445 clients who are receiving therapy from a SPPN provider.

What makes the SPPN team's process notable is their efforts to get to know providers in order to best match a client for care. Then, provider's strengths, style, language capabilities and cultural backgrounds are considered when clients are hand matched to their provider. Mental Health Program Specialist Laura Smith, who oversees the SPPN, screens every provider who wants to join the network; she meets with them and discusses what they can expect in their role. This personalized care and attention to match, as opposed to just refer, clients to providers encourages a positive relationship and a better fit between client and provider as well as creates a sense of belonging and of support to providers. The SPPN provider assigned will then work directly with the regional clinic treatment team to coordinate care. It is a collaborative effort to help clients meet their treatment goals.



In the face of the many system changes, the SPPN team and Access remain dedicated to their work, with the client and provider experience always at the core. Speaking of Access generally, Laura says, "A lot of us have been with Access for a long time, part of that speaks to the team's dedication - they really just want to help."

**The SPPN team**, from left to right: Yazmin Lainez, Jocelyn Cerda Garcia (Access supervisor), Soo Jee Kim, Laura Smith, Jacky Guan.



In 2024, the average hold time for calls answered by the Access Call Center was **54 seconds**, significantly shorter than the 10-minute answer time mandated by the [California Department of Managed Health Care](#).

## Outpatient Utilization Management Drives Key Services Delivery

Within Access, the Outpatient Utilization Management (UM) team is essential in facilitating clients access to the specialty services they require. By promptly responding to provider requests for the approval or denial of services, the UM team drives the BHRS service delivery process forward. In addition, the UM team is tasked with adhering to state and federal mandated compliance processes, which include:

- Confirming the medical necessity of specialty mental health services.
- Authorizing services that require prior approval.
- Ensuring timely decisions are made on service requests.
- Making organizational determinations and developing appropriate notifications.
- Reviewing the utilization of specialty mental health services.
- Collecting data for audits and reporting to state, federal and Health Plan entities.
- Upholding clients' rights to file grievances and appeals.

In 2024, the UM team (2 clinicians) processed a total of about 700 requests for youth and adults. These requests were varied and included services such as Therapeutic Behavioral Services, adult psychological testing, intensive outpatient and partial hospitalization programs for eating disorders and the non-invasive brain stimulation therapy called Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation. The approvals also included ongoing requests for outpatient treatment, letters of approval or denial, service contracts, out-of-county service authorizations and more. In 2024, the UM team wrote over fifty decision letters related to treatment modifications and denials.

All UM tasks are complex and require multiple workflows and organizations to process efficiently and effectively. Further, the team is required to use criteria to make a decision and notify clients and providers of the approval or denial, which can sometimes be as short as 72 hours.

Supervising Mental Health Psychologist Tsuey-Jing 'TJ' Fan shares, "My team and I enjoy our work in Access UM because we have an opportunity to assist clients and teams in accessing specialty mental health services that they need. It is rewarding to be a part of a team that is committed to providing quality care to the population we serve. Access and BHRS has amazing, wonderful staff that are a pleasure to work with and collaborative in the process of supporting clients."



The Access team at a retreat in June 2024.

**The UM team:** Tsuey-Jing Fan, Rayana Egea and Joyce Dizon.



In 2024, the five most common languages for interpreted calls to the Call Center were Spanish, Portuguese (Brazil), Cantonese, Mandarin and Turkish.

## Get to Know the Access Team

I have spent seven years with the County, starting as a Patient Services Assistant II in the specialty medical clinic at San Mateo Medical Center (SMMC). On my sixth month there I moved to Access and have been here ever since! As a Patient Services Assistant II, my team and I provide a gateway to get connected to behavioral health and rehabilitation services. I may be the first person a client talks to when they call the Access phone number, and being able to help a client right away is a deeply meaningful aspect of my role. The services needed can vary widely, from County resources to community support, including insurance, housing, primary care services and more. My experience at SMMC provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the County's offerings, which has helped me to better support clients. Additionally, I recently graduated from the Talent Accelerator Program in December 2024, a pilot initiative aimed at developing, guiding and supporting non-management County staff who aspire to advance their careers. Through learning about different departments, conducting interviews and enhancing core skills, this program provided me valuable insights into the County system, my potential within BHRS and the exciting opportunities that lie ahead. I am thankful for the learning and growth this program offered and would highly recommend it to other County staff.



**By Fabiola Salvador**, Patient Services Assistant II.

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My name is Noe C. Chavez, my journey with BHRS started on October 31, 2011, after leaving the SF County Jail systems, primarily at the San Bruno County Jail where I worked for a few years as a counselor. My first job with San Mateo County BHRS was as a counselor with Service Connect, working alongside correctional mental health and BHRS providing MH, AOD and housing services to individuals leaving incarceration and who qualified for the post release community supervision program. In March 2013 I was given the opportunity to work at the Access Call Center, and at first, I wondered if I made the right decision, but a few days into it, I knew I was home. For the past 13 years I've worked with a great group of admins and clinicians who make my daily work duties feel more like a family outing. There's a sense of cohesiveness and unity among us and we understand that helping those who struggle with mental health and substance use conditions is our primary purpose. I think it's important to have such camaraderie given the nature of our work, which can be very stressful at times. My goal is to continue to provide our clients with assistance in finding mental health and/or substance use services.

**By Noe C. Chavez**, Lead Behavioral Health and Recovery Services Specialist.