

A.B. 1001 HOSPITAL STANDARDS FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH EMERGENCY SERVICES

Assemblymember Matt Haney

BACKGROUND

A significant portion of patients with behavioral health care needs — including mental health and substance use considerations — enter California hospitals each year. In 2020, patients with behavioral health diagnoses represented one third of all inpatient hospitalizations and one fifth of all emergency department visits.¹

While solutions are being tested and funded to help patients as they navigate out of general acute-care hospitals, many patients with behavioral health considerations require non-psychiatric acute care in a hospital or remain in California's emergency departments as they await admission or discharge.

Under current law, there are no hospital standards to ensure appropriate staff are available and trained to care for patients throughout acute-care facilities who may experience behavioral health emergencies. There are also no hospital standards to ensure timely admissions or transfers of patients with behavioral health needs, once stable, out of emergency departments to more appropriate facilities or inpatient units.

PROBLEM

Hospitals are unprepared, understaffed, and lack dedicated behavioral health nurses and other appropriately trained and licensed staff to respond to patients experiencing emergency psychiatric or behavioral health crises. As a result, nurses, other health care workers, and their patients are placed in dangerous conditions.

For emergency department nurses and other health care workers, the number patients with psychiatric needs being held in emergency departments is associated with increased rates of workplace violence.² For patients

with behavioral health needs, they may be inappropriately boarded in emergency departments or under observation status, leading to delays in receiving mental health or acute-care treatment, worse outcomes, and preventable error.³ Nurses cannot provide high quality patient care to their patients, and patients with behavioral health needs do not receive appropriate acute-care or behavioral health services.

SOLUTION

California must create hospital standards to ensure that hospitals have appropriate staff available and trained to respond to patients who may experience behavioral health emergencies. The Health and Safety Code should be amended to include requirements that hospitals have appropriately trained psychiatric health care professionals, including psychiatric registered nurses, available to immediately respond to hospital patients outside of psychiatric units who may require behavioral health emergency services.



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Additionally, California can create hospital standards to ensure timely treatment, admissions, and transfers of emergency department or observation unit patients with behavioral health needs.

To meet growing behavioral health needs of hospital patients across the state, California can also establish a fund to support state or county programs to hire and train psychiatric nurses or other psychiatric health care professionals who can respond to behavioral health emergencies within a hospital. Dedicating appropriately trained and licensed hospital staff to respond to behavioral health emergencies would help address the immediate care needs of hospital patients with behavioral health needs and would help address rising rates of workplace violence in emergency departments.

Long-term solutions to expand California's psychiatric health care infrastructure and to end financial and insurance barriers to mental health care and substance use services would complement this legislation.

CONTACT

Mari Lopez » California Nurses Association
mlopez@calnurses.org » 213-713-1788

ENDNOTES

- 1 Department of Health Care Access and Information (2022), "Inpatient Hospitalizations and Emergency Department Visits for Patients with a Behavioral Health Diagnosis in California: Patient Demographics."
- 2 Costumbrado et al. (Feb. 2022), "Emergency Department Psychiatric Holds are Linked to Increased Emergency Department Violence." *Ethics Med Pub Health*, Vol 20.
- 3 Kelen et al. (2021), "Emergency Department Crowding: The Canary in the Health Care System," *NEJM Catalyst*.

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