



# News

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## San Mateo County Health Alert Highlights Pandemic's Impact on Mental Health and Substance Use

San Mateo County Health issued a health alert to clinical and social service program providers about the mental health toll COVID-19 is taking on the community. In San Mateo County, clinicians and health care programs report a substantial increase in youth and young adults with significant mental health issues and more cases of substance use, which mirrors national data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in its August and December reports.

In San Mateo County:

- The number of calls to the Behavioral Health & Recovery Services Access Call Center have been increasing since March 2020. The length of calls has increased as well.
- Referrals to the behavioral health clinicians embedded in primary care has increased for adults (by 51%) and youth (by 100%).
- There has been a 31% increase in the number of domestic violence victims served from March to November 2020 versus the same time period in 2019.
- There has been a 430% increase in overdose-related referrals to County Health's Medication Assisted Treatment outreach/response team.
- San Mateo Medical Center's Emergency Department has seen a 21% increase in treatment of opioid use disorders since March 2020 compared to the same period last year.

“The length of time we have asked the community to shelter in place, avoid being in large groups, and curtail many of the avenues for social interactions have really taken a toll on the mental health of our community,” said Vanessa de la Cruz, MD, Medical Director of Behavioral Health and Recovery Services. “We need to make sure that we health care professionals take care of ourselves so that we can continue to serve the community.”





San Mateo County Health recommends that clinicians and administrators of health care and social service programs strongly consider the increased prevalence of mental health conditions, substance use, and toxic stress in planning their services during this sustained pandemic.

The surge in new cases, increase in hospitalizations, and the resulting increase in deaths have also taken a toll on the health care workforce. The health advisory provides strategies for how employers can support and sustain a workforce that can continue to serve the community through this pandemic.

“Mental health and social stressors affect the pandemic fatigue that is impacting social distancing, wearing masks, and other preventive measures,” said Curtis Chan, MD, the county’s deputy health officer. “COVID-19 will be around for a while, even with effective therapeutics and the roll out of the vaccine. In addition to the infectious disease data we collect, it is very important that we also keep track of how we can limit the damage COVID-19 is inflicting on our mental well-being.”

The alert offers guidance for how providers of health and human services programs can best serve their clients, including increasing frequency of screening for mental health symptoms, substance use, suicidal ideation, domestic violence, child abuse, and commercial sexual exploitation of children.

“Now more than ever, we have to be able to address mental and behavioral health factors as key to beating COVID-19, said Dr. de la Cruz.

The alert [is available here](#).

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