

Greg Adams

Chairman and CEO, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan Inc. and Hospitals

Janet Liang

Executive Vice President, Group President and COO, Care Delivery, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan Inc. and Hospitals

Dr. Richard Isaacs

CEO and Executive Director, The Permanente Medical Group

Dr. Edward Ellison

Executive Medical Director, Southern California Permanente Medical Group

Dr. Ramin Davidoff

Executive Medical Director-Elect, Southern California Permanente Medical Group

Dear Mr. Adams, Ms. Liang and Drs. Isaacs, Ellison and Davidoff:

Our Kaiser Permanente members across California are reporting a sharp increase in patient wait times for individual return mental health and addiction medicine appointments even as they are seeing more patients per day than ever before. NUHW-represented psychiatric nurses and medical social workers are also reporting unsustainable workloads, while many therapists report higher acuity levels among their patients, including higher levels of suicidality. We are deeply concerned that as the pandemic grinds on, Kaiser is not equipped to meet the growing demand for behavioral health services among its enrollees.

Consequently, we would like to immediately begin working together to address this urgent situation.

NUHW's behavioral health clinicians are reporting that wait times for individual return treatment appointments now average six-to-eight weeks in many Kaiser clinics, with wait times as high as 12 weeks. Throughout the state, we're getting

reports from members that Kaiser is losing clinicians at an increasing rate due to resignations, while not showing sufficient urgency to replace them or significantly increase staffing.

It's clear to us that COVID-19 is putting tremendous strain on Kaiser Permanente's mental health care system, which was already stretched thin. We want to work together at the highest levels to quickly find solutions to improve access to care and working conditions in order to ensure adequate care for Kaiser's members and improve its ability to retain and attract clinicians.

As a first step, we are proposing:

1. A joint survey of mental health clinicians to determine how COVID-19 has impacted their workloads and their patients' access to care.
2. Sharing of Kaiser data that provides a clearer picture of trends in patient demand, appointment supply, appointment wait times, patient acuity levels, clinician workload, and staffing trends during the pandemic.
3. A virtual listening tour of Kaiser mental health clinics this month, so Kaiser's top leaders can understand the unique challenges faced by therapists.

As you can imagine, the COVID-19 pandemic is also putting tremendous strain on clinicians, who are primarily treating higher-acuity patients that aren't referred to outside providers. Prior to the pandemic, clinicians reported that they did not have enough time to complete important patient care work such as charting, contacting social service agencies, scheduling emergency appointments and following up on calls and emails. Many clinicians could only do that work when they had a cancellation. Now that nearly all appointments are virtual, the appointment-cancellation rate has plunged from one-in-five appointments to one-in-20 appointments. Clinicians simply don't have enough time to get their work done, and technological challenges related to telehealth have added numerous administrative tasks for clinicians who don't have support staff to assist them. Consequently, more clinicians are burning out and leaving Kaiser

due to the strain as well as their inability to provide clinically appropriate care to their patients.

We estimate that because of the sharp decline in appointment cancellations, Kaiser's non-MD clinicians are conducting at least 50,000 more appointments per month statewide. While clinicians are committed to meeting the increased need for mental health services, the current situation is simply not sustainable without a sharp and rapid increase in staffing.

We commend Kaiser Permanente for rising to the medical challenge of COVID-19. Now, seven months into a pandemic, we believe it's time to work together to rise to the mental health challenges we are facing during this pandemic.

Sincerely,
Sal Rosselli, President
National Union of Healthcare Workers

cc: Christian Meisner
Jim Pruitt
NUHW members