

HOMEPAGE

**Capitol Alert**

Kaiser mental health patients waiting months for appointments in Sacramento-area, employees say

BY CATHIE ANDERSON

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Kaiser Permanente Behavioral health clinicians rallied on Dec. 19, 2019 at the California Capitol before taking to downtown Sacramento streets. BY [ALYSSA HODENFIELD](#) | [CATHIE ANDERSON](#)



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Sacramento resident Jasmin Hakes said her daughter Riana Mutabdzija has attempted suicide several times but their family still can't manage to get a Kaiser Permanente therapist to see her on a regular basis.

"We were told multiple times that they did not have a therapist that she could see regularly and she was given pamphlets for meditation and sent home and told to go to the emergency room if it got worse."

Hakes and her daughter joined a press briefing with Kaiser therapists, union leader Sal Rosselli and state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, Thursday morning to urge Kaiser to reduce excessive wait times for follow-up appointments that therapists said currently extend at least 2.5 months in the Sacramento region.

Wiener co-authored Senate Bill 221, which beginning Friday, mandates that health care plans provide patients with follow-up appointments within 10 business days if a therapist recommends subsequent sessions. This year, he's carrying another bill that would increase fines against the companies by tenfold if they don't meet the mandated timetable for appointments.

"You can't give someone a first appointment and then make them wait two or three months for the second and subsequent appointments because that completely undermines effective mental health treatment," said Wiener.

Thursday's press conference followed news in May that the California Department of Managed Health Care into Kaiser's mental health services following an increase in patient complaints.

"I work as a triage therapist where I help people in crisis and those needing linkage to an initial appointment," said Sarah Soroken, a Kaiser employee on Thursday's video briefing. "Many of the calls I receive are from patients who have been waiting weeks or months for their individual therapy appointments. In many cases, their mental health has worsened since their last appointment."

Kaiser described the news conference as "a public pressure campaign," saying that the National Union of Healthcare Workers had organized the news briefing to pressure the health care giant to give into labor contract demands in the latest round of bargaining.

"There is a national shortage of mental health clinicians that was already a challenge before the pandemic, and over the past 2.5 years, the demand for care has increased everywhere," said Kaiser leaders in a statement.

"We have been taking action to address the shortage of caregivers and to ensure care is available to our members. We have the greatest respect and gratitude for our mental health professionals and are committed to supporting them in their vitally important work," the statement read.

KAISER HIRING MENTAL HEALTH POSITIONS

The California Legislative Analyst's Office projects the state will face a shortage of behavioral health specialists by 2028. In a report last year, it noted "California graduates with professional mental health degrees increased significantly over the previous decade," but acknowledged that some regions of the state are comparably underserved. Kaiser leaders said they have added 170 net new clinicians in California to address patient needs and that the rate at which they are hiring mental health clinicians continues to be faster than the rate that our membership is growing. Currently, the company has more than 300 open clinical positions.

Company leaders said they also had significantly expanded the availability of virtual appointments to patients who want it, increasing convenience and access since patients can get on a computer or handheld device and speak with therapists over a video call.

But a number of patients and Kaiser employees say their experiences show that video visits haven't made a dent in reducing waits and that the health care company is struggling.

FAMILY'S STRUGGLE FOR MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

NUHW President Sal Rosselli said Kaiser's mental health system is not suffering because of an industry shortage of mental health clinicians but because of a shortage of therapists who want to work for Kaiser or who want to subcontract with Kaiser.

"Kaiser officials ... are saying that they're trying to fill 400 mental health clinician openings," he said, "but they're not saying that the reason they have so many openings is because clinicians are leaving Kaiser in record numbers. In the 12 months between last June and the end of May, 668 clinicians have left Kaiser, approximately double the amount of clinicians who left each of the previous two years."

Soroken, the Kaiser employee, shared redacted schedules showing that, in Roseville, patients are waiting more than two months to see therapists after their initial intake appointments. In Sacramento, the wait is 2.5 months, and three months in Manteca.

"In San Mateo, there wasn't even an appointment available to schedule," Soroken said. "You can see no appointment available under the search date in the top left corner. In this situation patients are placed on a wait list for an appointment or are told to call back later, meaning patients will wait more than three months for their first therapy appointment."

Hakes said that her family has gone through quite an ordeal over the last three years to get Mutabdzija, now 21, the help she needed, finally resorting to raising funds privately to pay for treatment.

"In 2020, she was hospitalized again for severe depression and suicidal ideations," Hakes said. "After two weeks, she was discharged and told that Kaiser would get back to us for her regular care. ... After about three months of us calling every day and leaving them voicemails and emails, she overdosed and ended up on life support in the ICU, which then prompted them to finally try to get her seen. We were told that there was no room in any of their hospitals. And so we fundraised privately to get her care."

Hakes said that her family has been informed of the type of therapy that would help Mutabdzija but that they have not been assigned a therapist to provide it.

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Read more at: <https://www.sacbee.com/article263070053.html#storylink=cpy>