

An Act relative to behavioral health urgent care H.2083 (Representative Decker)



What problem does this bill address?

The CDC has reported that almost **75 percent of people aged 18-24 reported at least one adverse behavioral health symptom as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and that roughly 1 in 4 have seriously considered suicide.** Even prior to the pandemic, research demonstrates that approximately **one in five children and adolescents experiences the signs and symptoms of a diagnosable mental health disorder each year.**

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact children and youth, the Commonwealth must be prepared to support these emerging and exacerbated behavioral health concerns. Urgent care is a **key strategy for addressing emerging behavioral health crises at the earliest possible time and reducing the need for children to access care for acute behavioral health needs in an emergency department.**

To implement a system of behavioral health urgent care, the Department of Public Health (DPH) must develop regulations for urgent care centers, including requiring such centers to provide behavioral health services. By expanding settings in which behavioral health services are offered, children and families will have better access to care during behavioral health crises.

This bill will:

- Require that DPH regulate existing urgent care clinics through a licensing process
- Expand the services provided in urgent care clinics to include behavioral health services
- Ensure coordination of behavioral health care between urgent care clinics and primary care providers or existing behavioral health providers
- Require qualified behavioral health clinicians to provide behavioral health services and treatment

This bill specifies that such behavioral health services include evaluation and stabilization for a patient presenting with behavioral health signs and/or symptoms and referrals to appropriate treatment in community or inpatient care. By providing behavioral health care in urgent care settings, families can access necessary services before an emergency occurs.

What difference will this bill make?

With a focus on equity:

Research has found that Black and brown communities are more likely to use emergency rooms to access mental health care and are less likely to use outpatient services.¹ Lack of community-based urgent care leads many to seek services in settings ill-equipped to provide such care.² Despite the growing conversation about the need for culturally-competent care, Black and brown communities are significantly more likely to be misdiagnosed or denied treatment. Behavioral health urgent care serves as a community-based solution to these major issues as children and families can access services and receive appropriate care before a behavioral health emergency occurs.

Why is this bill needed now?

The boarding crisis, in which a person in the emergency department (ED) requires inpatient psychiatric care, but there are no appropriate psychiatric placements available, has dramatically worsened in recent years, leaving children stuck for days awaiting for appropriate care. Urgent care is key to addressing emerging behavioral health crises and ensuring children and families can access timely and appropriate treatment.