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**BY [JILL JORDAN SIEDER](#)**

A year after [HB 1013](#), the landmark bipartisan legislation known as the [Georgia Mental Health Parity Act](#), went into effect, some important initiatives aimed at expanding treatment for people in Georgia with mental health and addiction issues are moving forward. Other initiatives have been stalled by funding challenges and clashing political priorities of state leaders.

The Mental Health Parity Act of 2022 is designed to broadly expand services to ensure people with mental health or addiction issues are treated by public and private health insurers the same as physical health conditions. The 76-page act includes a number of short-term and longer-term initiatives.

*State Affairs*

It's important to note that [HB 520](#), another ambitious mental health bill introduced last session that was a sequel of sorts to HB 1013 and which many behavioral health reform advocates considered to be critical to its implementation, did not pass. Some Republicans balked at HB 520's annual cost, estimated by Gov. Brian Kemp's budget director to be between \$60 million and \$72 million.

And while overall state funding for the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) increased by 8% to \$1.5 billion in fiscal year 2024, \$104 million in line items to support behavioral health and parity efforts were

Other areas seeing some progress are:

- **Workforce Development**

As of 2021, some 150 out of 159 counties in the state were considered mental health care professional shortage areas — 77 counties had no psychiatrists working full-time, 76 counties did not have a licensed psychologist, and 52 had no licensed social worker.

One way the Parity Act addresses this deficit is to incentivize people to pursue behavioral health careers by helping to pay off their student loans. The Georgia Student Finance Authority has created a service cancellable [loan program](#), which launches this fall. Starting in November, students pursuing graduate degrees in qualifying behavioral health professions can apply for up to \$20,000 in student loans per year, for a maximum of \$120,000 over 6 years.

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The [Georgia Public Safety Training Center](#) has added behavioral health co-responders to law enforcement and other occupations to which they provide facilities and training.

DBHDD reported in June that it had funded nine co-responder programs pairing mental health providers and law enforcement agencies throughou912(en-S)7ghou31 mE-de,F2 13a4

health reform legislation next year. They're also hoping to restore vetoed funding for three behavioral health crisis centers, salary increases for state psychiatric hospital staff, and a housing voucher program for the mentally ill.

Mary Margaret Oliver, a lead sponsor of both mental health bills, recently wrote on her blog, "These budget cuts, in my view, derail Georgia's forward movement on mental health reform, and I and many others are scrambling to regroup and figure out how to make the money reappear for needed services."