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MDHHS presents new approach to strengthen behavioral health at joint legislative hearing

LANSING, Mich. – Today Robert Gordon, director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), presented to a bipartisan panel of legislators the department's vision for a strengthened behavioral health system, serving individuals with severe mental illness, substance use disorders, and developmental disabilities. The new system will integrate physical and behavioral health services to improve outcomes and meet the growing demand for mental health care in Michigan.

"Michigan has a golden opportunity to improve services for our loved ones – to expand access, to reduce red tape and to strengthen our behavioral health system for the long haul," Gordon said. "We have so many strengths to build on, beginning with the heroic work of providers and caregivers statewide. We're going to build on those strengths and establish an integrated approach to care that finally treats the whole person."

Despite the strengths of the current public behavioral health system, Medicaid participants continue to face challenges, such as a lack of coordination between physical health and mental health professionals. Participants find the system confusing to navigate and it can be difficult for families to find the right services.

MDHHS proposes a new approach to behavioral health that will lead to greater choice of providers, better coordination of services, and increased investment in behavioral health. To advance these goals, Gordon outlined three key principles for system design:

- Preserving a strong safety net.
- Integrating physical and behavioral health in both care and financing.
- Establishing Specialty Integrated Plans (SIPs).

SIPs bring together the management skills of traditional insurance companies with the expertise and depth of behavioral health organizations. Already in use in other states, including North Carolina, Arizona and Arkansas, SIPs allow for stronger and simpler oversight with lower administrative costs.

The department's approach will also preserve the extra protections available today, including person-centered planning (ensuring people actively participate in the design of their care), recipient rights and comprehensive services and supports. It also creates opportunities for further innovation in how care can be delivered.

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“To achieve better care for Michiganders, the department will work together with families, advocates, providers and legislators,” Gordon said. “We look forward to sharing this approach with our stakeholders and especially with those we serve. Working with them, and building on the best of our current system, we will design a model that improves outcomes and treats individuals with the dignity they deserve.”

It is expected the new Medicaid-funded integrated health plan will launch in 2022. Four public forums will be scheduled in January 2020 to hear feedback and questions as policy design and planning move forward.

More information can be found at Michigan.gov/FutureOfBehavioralHealth, where there is also an opportunity to provide comment on this vision to improve the public behavioral health system.

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