



February 6, 2026

Dear Members of the Behavioral Health Board,

The Sonoma County LEAP Board respectfully requests a review of the existing procedures for acquiring behavioral health referrals and accessing behavioral health services within Sonoma County for the unhoused population.

At present, primary pathways to care and referrals require individuals to either call an access line or present in person for an assessment. This model often requires individuals to disclose deeply personal and traumatic experiences to unfamiliar staff in stressful or unfamiliar settings. For many, this process is retraumatizing and discourages honest engagement. As a result, assessments frequently fail to capture the true level of need and do not consistently connect individuals to appropriate behavioral health care. These barriers have a disproportionate impact on unhoused individuals, many of whom rely on a behavioral health referral as their sole pathway to housing.

Several significant gaps contribute to this outcome. Many individuals in urgent need of mental health services are unaware that a formal screening or assessment is required to access care. Others face practical limitations, including lack of phone access, unreliable battery life, or an inability to remain on hold for extended periods. Some do not believe that a phone-based intake process is accessible or manageable given their circumstances.

Those seeking in-person assessments, transportation presents a further barrier. Without reliable means to reach assessment locations, access to care is effectively denied. Even when assessments are completed, fear, mistrust, and prior trauma may lead individuals to withhold critical information necessary for accurate evaluation and screening.

These concerns are consistently echoed through lived experience, frontline observations, and community feedback. They reflect a clear system gap that requires attention from the Division of Behavioral Health, the Department of Health, the Homeless Coalition, and the Mental Health Board.

As we enter the new year, there is a critical opportunity to close this gap by developing more accessible, flexible, and trauma-informed pathways to behavioral health services for unhoused individuals. Potential strategies for consideration include:

- Empowering Outreach Teams to initiate behavioral health screenings and flag those with critical needs directly where individuals are.
- Integrating behavioral health referral authority within Multidisciplinary Outreach Teams.
- Incorporating a limited number of targeted behavioral health screening questions into the current Coordinated Entry Assessment process to support focused triage. The goal is not increasing assessment volume, but improved identification and prioritization of individuals presenting acute or high-risk behavioral health indicators who may otherwise be overlooked.

By reducing procedural barriers and meeting individuals where they are, Sonoma County has the opportunity to significantly improve access to behavioral health services and increase the likelihood of meaningful engagement in care.

We respectfully urge this Board to consider these concerns, respond to this letter, and explore system-level changes that strengthen the behavioral health continuum and ensure that those most at risk are not left without care.

Sincerely,

Sonoma County LEAP Board



RSVP