

# How Health Systems are Leveraging Virtual Care to Scale and Sustain Outpatient Behavioral Health Care

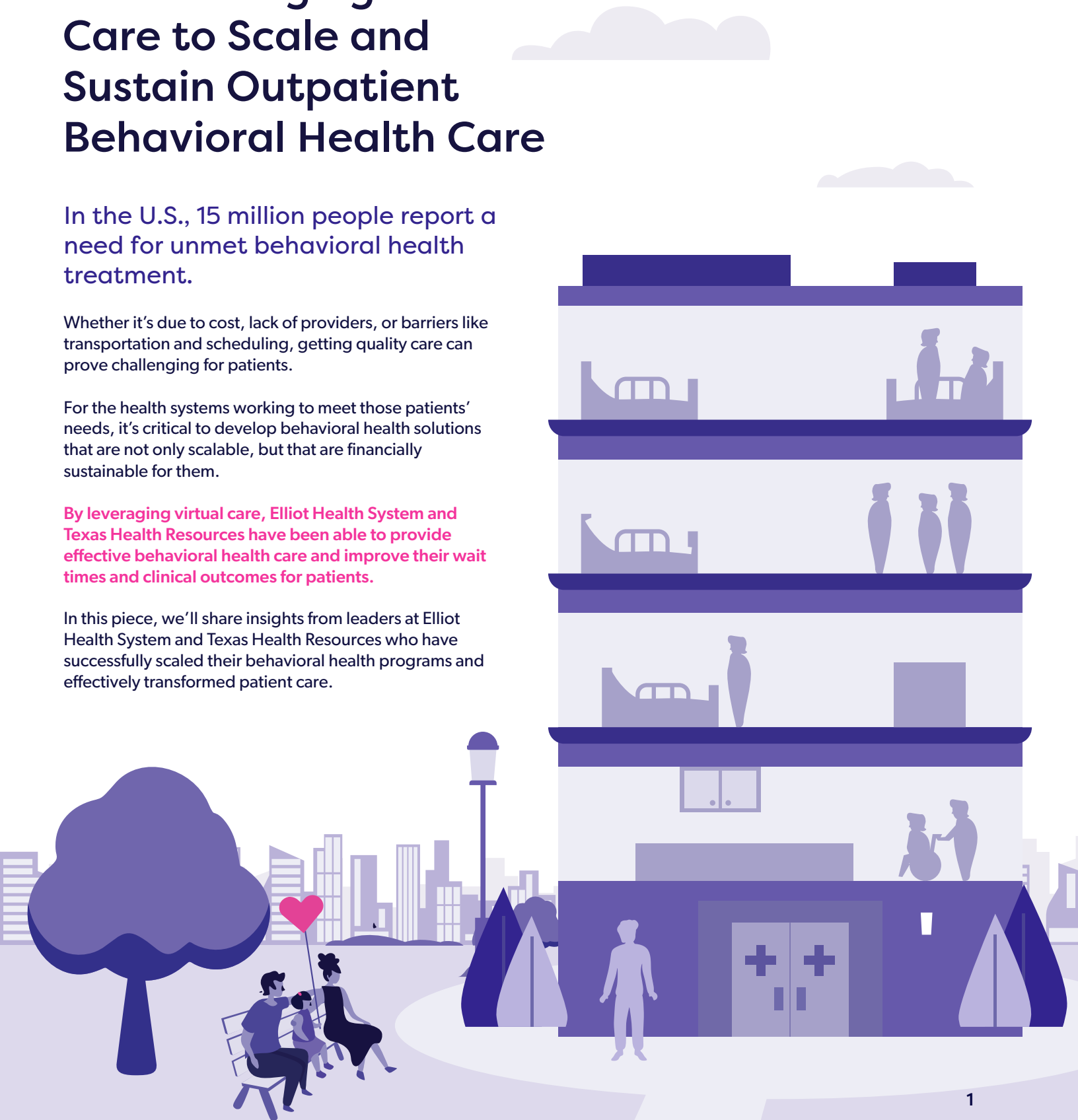
In the U.S., 15 million people report a need for unmet behavioral health treatment.

Whether it's due to cost, lack of providers, or barriers like transportation and scheduling, getting quality care can prove challenging for patients.

For the health systems working to meet those patients' needs, it's critical to develop behavioral health solutions that are not only scalable, but that are financially sustainable for them.

**By leveraging virtual care, Elliot Health System and Texas Health Resources have been able to provide effective behavioral health care and improve their wait times and clinical outcomes for patients.**

In this piece, we'll share insights from leaders at Elliot Health System and Texas Health Resources who have successfully scaled their behavioral health programs and effectively transformed patient care.



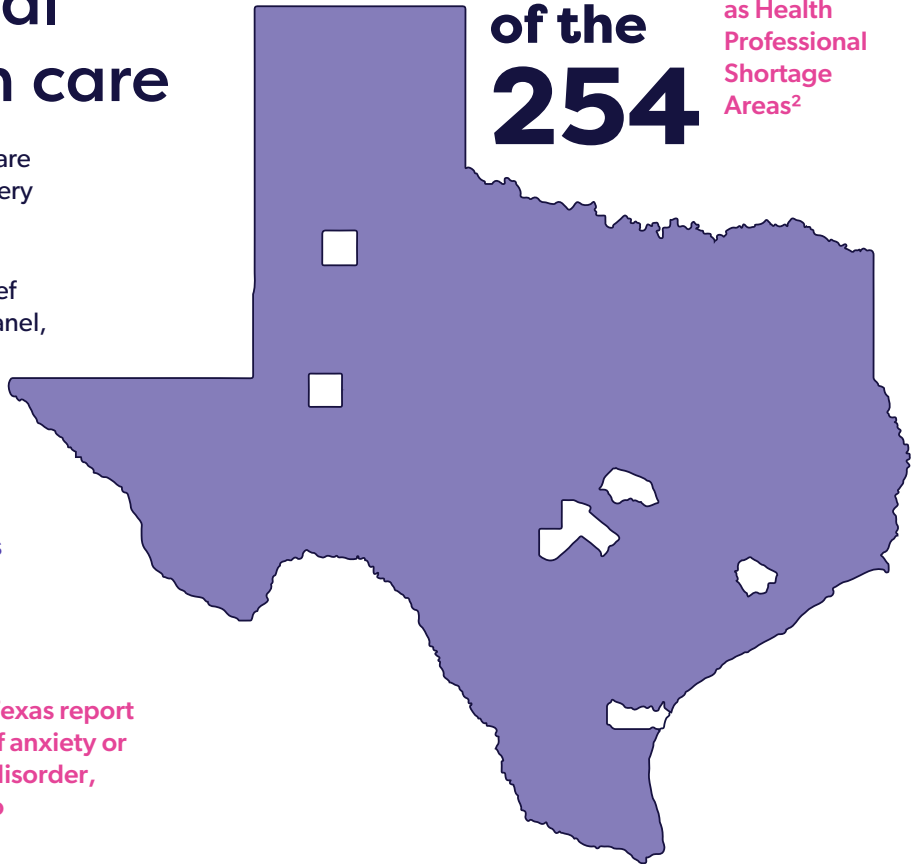
# Long wait times drive the need for virtual behavioral health care

Making sure people can get behavioral health care they need when they need it is at the heart of every healthcare organization's mission.

At Texas Health Resources (THR), Kathi Cox, Chief Operating Officer of Ambulatory and Virtual Chanel, says the rate of depression in the communities they serve is at an all-time high. To serve those communities, THR was experiencing a lack of resources -- particularly to help their adolescent and senior population.

That meant THR patients were sometimes *waiting for care anywhere from six to 10 weeks for an initial appointment.*

**246**  
of the  
**254** counties in the state of Texas are designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas<sup>2</sup>

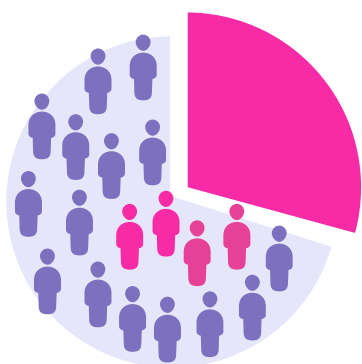


**36.8%** of adults in Texas report symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, compared to

**32.3%** of U.S. adults<sup>3</sup>



## For health systems, having adequate behavioral health resources is critical



**29%**

of adults in New Hampshire reported symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorder compared to

**32.3%**

of U.S. adults<sup>4</sup>

Elliot Health System (Elliot) in New Hampshire is also familiar with the strain of resources that come from the provider shortage.



**At Elliot one out of every five calls to their triage nurses was for behavioral health, with an average length of call being 27 to 30 minutes, creating burnout and keeping patients from care.**

Dr. Holly Mintz, Chief Medical Officer at Elliot, shared that ensuring patients had someone to see for their behavioral health needs in a holistic manner was at the top of their list of priorities.

“We want to make sure that it was not acceptable to have a 60-day wait between a referral and an intake process, let alone seeing a provider.

We really needed to focus on decreasing the time to care, which we knew would benefit care holistically.”

**Dr. Holly Mintz,**  
Chief Medical Officer  
Elliot Health System



# Truly integrated behavioral health is integral to early access to treatment and better outcomes

Virtual behavioral health services enable early access to treatment and better outcomes. They also serve as an avenue to prevent hospitalizations.

Through quality programming and the attentive support of a strategic partnership, meeting behavioral health goals like time to care becomes more attainable.

“We were able to convert triage calls into actual full intakes from a licensed social worker that provided the patient with a full evaluation and were billable. We were able to cover the cost of investing in provider hiring by converting those triage calls to a full intake.

There’s a brief triage (assessing presence of a crisis), then the patients have an intake and transfer within one to two business days. That visit is billable. It’s a benefit for everyone and helped make this new program sustainable.”

**Dr. Holly Mintz**  
Chief Medical Officer  
Elliot Health System



“By taking an aggressive and proactive approach to behavioral health integration in their communities, hospitals and health systems can see more patients using their outpatient care services and fewer patients using their EDs for behavioral disorders.”

**The American Hospital Association<sup>5</sup>**

THR views behavioral health as an investment in other service lines, rather than a standalone program, leveraging it as a component of care for their chronic patients.

At Elliot, virtual behavioral health allows them to address their wait times and take a proactive approach to holistic care.

**Because of telehealth,  
Elliot was able to reduce  
their intake wait time from**

**60 to 1-3**  
business days.

# How to secure buy-in from key stakeholders at your health system

## A data and patient-centric approach

THR implemented a strategic initiative called, "Vision 2026," which **puts the patient at the center of every decision they make.**

Together, they worked to better understand their community and determine where their patients were going for care. They also wanted to **tune into their data** and **have a good understanding whether they need to build or buy a solution.**

When they started to look for a partner, they did a lot of research and shared the findings with their organization.

"Up until now, we released [patients] into the wild with no way to lasso them back or to have physicians where their medical home was, have information about their treatment.

Then finally, the last stakeholder is our organization. We want to make sure they understand how we are staying accountable and what the outcomes are that we promised and how we are achieving them."

### Kathi Cox

Chief Operating Officer  
of Ambulatory and  
Virtual Channel  
Texas Health Resources



"We were able to help engage our senior leadership in really bolstering our outpatient support, in addition to the fact that we all know it's a competitive world out there, and we're all hoping to attract providers, triage nurses, and medical assistants.

If we can take a situation that is causing a significant amount of stress and manage it better, we hope that we will be on people's top of mind for a place where they want to work and deliver care."

### Dr. Holly Mintz

Chief Medical Officer  
Elliot Health System



## Focus on outpatient support and provider retention

At Elliot, Dr. Mintz met with their medical group to understand their challenges and their primary take away was the **need for behavioral health access.**

They also determined an integrated solution would provide more support, **inherently drive provider satisfaction**, and be **appealing to future providers.**

## How health systems are defining success

Every organization defines success differently. However, one common thread between Elliot and THR is ensuring behavioral health care is a priority and well-integrated into patient care.

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Success in three to five years looks like very strong relationships between our

behavioral health and employed physicians – whether that’s in our psychiatric practice, inpatient, or outpatient space. Rather than it be two different areas – these groups are working together.

Traditionally, you have a lot of primary care physicians or specialists dealing with their patient’s medical health over here and mental health issues over there – it’s very disjointed.

Now that we’ve created a much more integrated approach, there’s an opportunity for those things to work together. If we are collaborating across the organization for these patients, I think that’s a big success area.

**Kathi Cox**

Chief Operating Officer, Ambulatory and Virtual Channel  
Texas Health Resources

We are looking to enhance a straightforward process for patients and help them navigate it. So, when somebody presents with cancer, there’s a nurse navigator that helps them navigate through the system.

What we hope to do is make things very simple so when a primary care provider sees a patient who needs behavioral health services and has a general assessment of what they need, they’re referred to one place – there’s not nine different referrals where they could potentially go, and there’s an understanding of what the provider feels that patient needs.

**Dr. Holly Mintz**

Chief Medical Officer  
Elliot Health System

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# How to get started with your virtual behavioral health program

At Iris, we're proud to partner with Elliot Health System and Texas Health Resources to help them provide quality behavioral health care to their communities.

In a recent webinar, they generously shared their insights into their organization's behavioral health approach and the keys to their success. If you'd like to learn more about their approach, you can watch the [webinar here](#).

If you'd like to learn more about behavioral health integration, [contact us today!](#)

## Impactful behavioral health outcomes

Treating behavioral health conditions in outpatient settings is directly tied to a reduction in medical and pharmacy costs.<sup>6</sup>

Health systems report savings of up to \$2,565 per person over the 15 months following a diagnosis and up to \$3,321 per person over the 27 months following a diagnosis.

## Sources

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