

Behavioral Health System Navigation 101

Background and Overview

Behavioral Health System Navigation 101



Abbey Ferenzi, LMHC

Senior Director of Behavioral Health Association
Iowa Primary Care Association (Iowa PCA)

Relevant to the content of this educational activity, I do not have any financial conflicts with ineligible companies to disclose.

Today's Journey: What We'll Cover

- Introducing Iowa PCA's Role in Behavioral Health
- Understanding the Need for System Navigation
- Deep Dive into Behavioral Health System Navigation
- Real-World Impact: Examples of System Navigation in Action
- Benefits for Iowans, Providers, and Partners
- Accessing System Navigation: Referral Pathways
- Key Takeaways & Next Steps
- Questions & Discussion

A Unified Approach: Iowa's New Behavioral Health Service System

- **On July 1, 2025**, Iowa launched a new, unified Behavioral Health Service System.
- This significant overhaul combines mental health and substance use services, aiming to **streamline access and ensure consistent care** across the state.
- The goal: Make it easier for *all* Iowans to get the help they need, no matter where they go for support.
- A key component of this new system is the role of the **Iowa Primary Care Association as the Behavioral Health Administrative Service Organization (BH-ASO)**.



Who is the Iowa PCA?



Iowa Primary Care Association (Iowa PCA)

- Non-profit association founded in 1988
- Members include 14 Community Health Centers (CHCs) across the state and considerable experience engaging with providers and stakeholders statewide
- Ongoing commitment to expanding access to quality, affordable, and accessible healthcare to meet local needs
- Support a continuum of care including integrated behavioral health, medical, oral health, and pharmacy services

Organizational Values



Accountable



Collaborative



Deliberate



Proactive



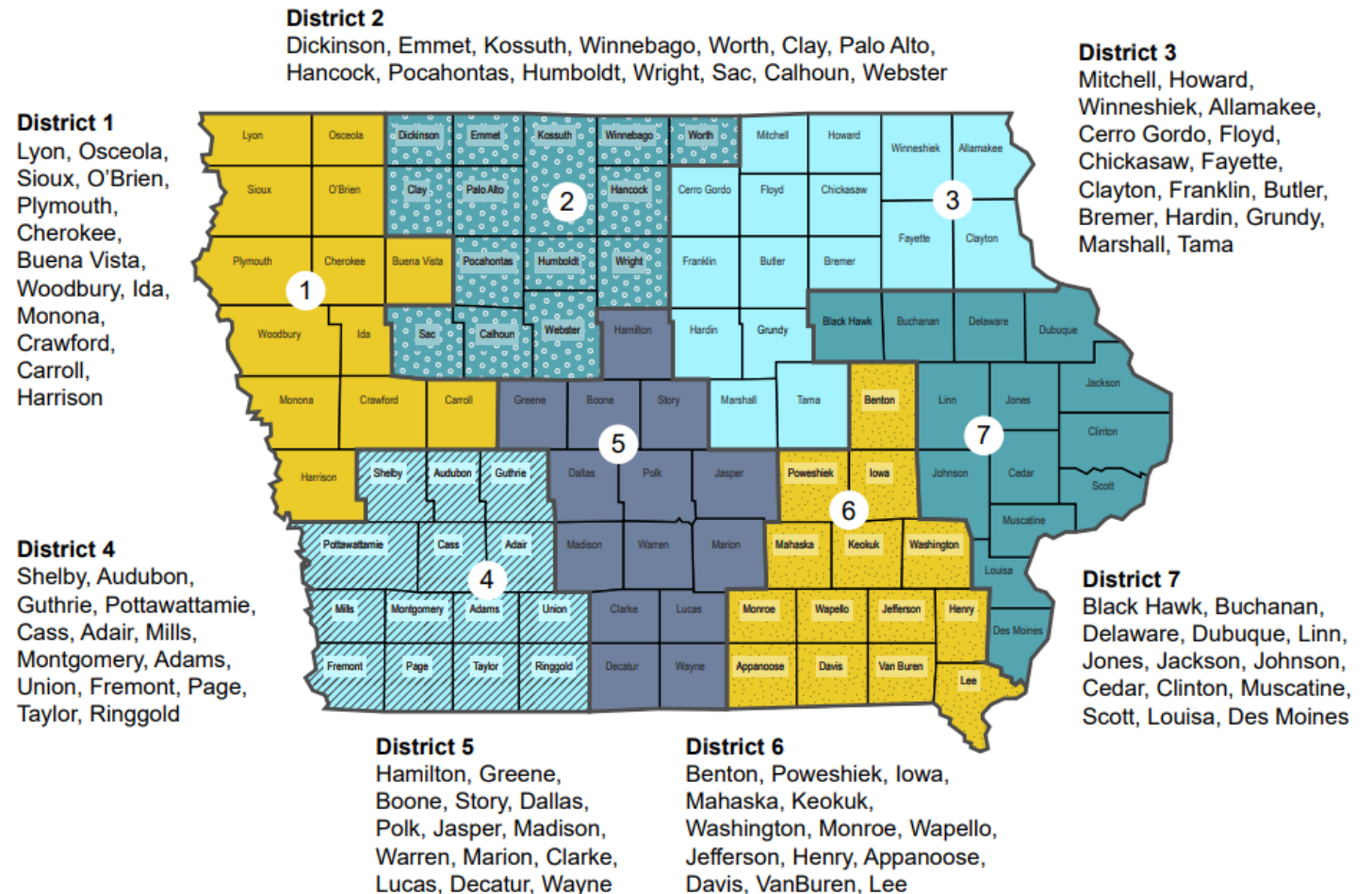
Respectful



Transformative

Iowa PCA's Pivotal Role as BH-ASO

Under the new statewide system, the Iowa PCA serves as the **central administrative and coordinating body** Iowa's 7 behavioral health districts.



System Alignment



In the previous system:

- Navigating across counties, regions and systems was confusing
- Outcomes were not satisfactory
- There was a large amount of duplicative administrative red tape (causes providers to shift away from providing support and services)

Through alignment Iowa will:

- Create consistent pathways for accessing services
- Building and expanding services across the continuum
- Use existing funding more effectively towards outcomes
- Streamline administrative work

The Challenge: Navigating a Complex System

- Individuals and families seeking behavioral health support, and even the dedicated professionals trying to help them, often face a complex and fragmented system. This leads to delays, frustration, and missed opportunities for early intervention.
- This complexity can deter people from seeking help
- When someone is stressed or symptomatic, navigating a complex system is even more difficult
- Individuals facing stigma-related barriers need encouragement and support

Leading the Charge: Developing System Navigation



The Iowa PCA is not just administering the system; we are actively leading and supporting the development of Behavioral Health System Navigation statewide.

Our efforts include:

- **Partnering with "Your Life Iowa"**
- **Developing comprehensive resources and training**
- **Ensuring consistent application and availability**
- **Collaborating with diverse stakeholders**

This leadership ensures that System Navigation is **standardized, effective, and truly person-centered** for every Iowan.

What is System Navigation?

Personalized, One-on-One Support: A crucial direct connection helps the navigator understand unique needs and provide tailored support and follow-up, building trust and operating with a person-centric model.

System Navigators DO:	System Navigators DO NOT:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide extensive information, education, and guidance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide treatment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer application assistance for services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provider medication
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify options to overcome barriers to access.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide counseling
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support during key transitions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide crisis intervention
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide referrals and warm handoffs to appropriate providers and long-term services.	

Accessing System Navigation: Your Entry Points

For Patients, Supporters, and Caregivers



Call: 855-581-8111



Text: 855-895-8398



Chat: yourlifeiowa.org

Accessing System Navigation: Your Entry Points

For Providers and Partners

Providers/Partners Will Be Provided Direct Numbers to District System Navigators

Providers and community
Partners can coordinate
directly with Iowa PCA System
Navigators by calling
(515) 505-8988.

- Providers and Partners (including hospitals and schools)
- Crisis (i.e., 988)
- Disability Access Points
- Other Support Lines (i.e., Warm Line, Iowa Concern)
- Managed Care Organizations
- Law Enforcement, Jails

What Makes System Navigation Unique?

- **"System Experts":** Navigators are highly trained, knowledgeable, and connected professionals who understand the intricate behavioral health system. They maintain expertise through community connections, networking, events, and a supported statewide network.
- **Brief, Focused Intervention:** It's designed for short-term support and connections, not long-term case management or ongoing treatment. It complements existing services by guiding individuals.
- **Low-Barrier & No Cost:** Services are entirely free, with very few eligibility requirements, making them accessible to anyone in Iowa (individuals, families, caregivers, professionals). No insurance or income requirements. Low barrier access for all.
- **Broad Reach:** Supports both individuals seeking services directly AND professionals, family members, or other "helpers" on behalf of others.
- **Designed for Rural Areas:** Explicitly bridges gaps in care, ensuring access regardless of geographic location.

How System Navigation Works: Addressing Barriers



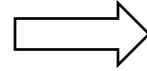
Navigators help overcome common barriers including:

- **Financial & Access Barriers:** Finding low-cost or no-cost options.
- **Communication & Information Barriers:** Ensuring clear, understandable options and next steps.
- **Behavioral Health System Barriers:** Streamlining connections, reducing delays.
- **Fear, Distrust, & Emotional Barriers:** Providing a trusted guide to reduce anxiety and foster safety.

System Navigation in Action: Supporting Individuals & Families



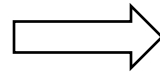
Situation: A rural resident newly diagnosed with depression doesn't know what behavioral health services are available in their small town or nearby, and they are worried about stigma.



Navigator's Role: Identifies local or telehealth options, helps them connect with care, and ensures the services are appropriate and accessible while providing reassurance to address stigma



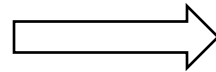
Situation: A parent notices their 15-year-old is isolating, skipping school, and possibly using substances, but doesn't know where to start.



Navigator's Role: Assesses needs, educates, and guides the family through referrals to adolescent mental health and substance use resources, ensuring they get connected.



Situation: An individual leaves the hospital with a list of outpatient providers but no appointments scheduled, feeling overwhelmed.

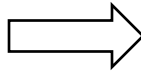


Navigator's Role: Helps set appointments, arranges transportation, and ensures a warm handoff to ongoing care and follow-up.

System Navigation in Action: Equipping Professionals & Addressing Complex Needs



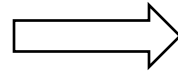
Situation: Someone with untreated schizophrenia is regularly reported for disturbances but doesn't meet criteria for inpatient care. Law enforcement reaches out for help



Navigator's Role: Engages this person, builds trust, and coordinates with mental health providers, housing, and community supports to interrupt the cycle. They connect to co-response or outreach teams if available.



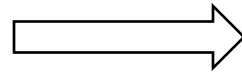
Situation: A trusted adult (Community Provider) sees someone in distress but doesn't know what to recommend or how to help.



Navigator's Role: Accepts third-party referrals, contacts the individual (with consent), and offers options, resources, and warm transfers to care. Provides support to the referee if consent is not given.



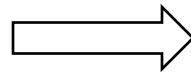
Situation: A person recently released from jail has a history of substance use and mental health needs but no insurance or stable housing, trying to rebuild their life.



Navigator's Role: Connects them to reentry supports, behavioral health care, Medicaid enrollment, housing programs, and peer support. Links to long-term case management if needed.



Situation: A person with co-occurring mental health and intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) is falling through the cracks, with each system thinking the other should take the lead.

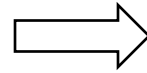


Navigator's Role: Bridges these systems, coordinates across providers, and ensures integrated supports that meet the person's full needs, staying connected until linked to appropriate case management.

System Navigation in Action: Overcoming Barriers & Fostering Recovery



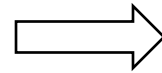
Situation: Someone on the waitlist for therapy has manageable symptoms but they're getting worse while they wait for an appointment.



Navigator's Role: Offers help with alternatives like support groups, community programs, drop-in centers, peer support, or Warm Lines, providing interim support and coping tools.



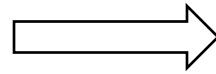
Situation: A person with anxiety knows they need help but feel paralyzed by phone calls, forms, and logistics.



Navigator's Role: Reduces barriers by assisting with calls, explaining the process step-by-step, helping fill out paperwork, and checking in regularly to support follow-through.



Situation: Someone speaks limited English and are struggling with depression, but they can't find a provider who speaks their language.



Navigator's Role: Locates linguistically appropriate providers or interpreter-supported services and explains how to access care with dignity and respect.

System Navigation Updates

- Call volume
- Call types
- Trends and themes
- Challenges
- Successes



Your Role in a Supported Iowa



Iowa PCA Leads System Integration: As the BH-ASO, we're actively developing and supporting a unified behavioral health system and System Navigation across the state.

System Navigation Improves Access: Through early intervention, seamless coordination, and cross-sector collaboration, BH SN reduces barriers and connects Iowans to timely, non-crisis behavioral health support.

You Can Make a Difference: Understand when System Navigation is needed and how to effectively connect individuals and partnering professionals to navigators via Your Life Iowa or the dedicated professional line. Spread the word!

Collaborate for a Healthier Iowa: By utilizing and understanding System Navigation, we collectively strengthen our ability to support behavioral health needs in our state.

Questions & Discussion

- We welcome your insights and suggestions!
- Your feedback is valuable as we continue to refine and strengthen these services.

Thank you!

Abbey Ferenzi, LMHC

Email: aferenzi@iowapca.org

Phone: 515-349-1906

Website: iowapca.org

Provider Relations Email: bhasoproviderrelations@iowapca.org

For System Navigation Access:

- **Your Life Iowa (Public/Individuals):** 855-851-8111
- **Community Partners System Navigation Line:** 515-505-8988