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Health Plans Unite Around Proven Behavioral Health Measures to Strengthen Quality and Improve Outcomes

Washington, D.C. – Today, the Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness (ABHW), which represents health plans covering 200 million people, announced a first-ever shared commitment to improving behavioral health outcomes through measurement-informed care. Building on widely recognized quality measures, **ABHW is also calling for the next evolution in the field: moving beyond access alone and toward meaningful improvement in people’s lives.**

For decades, behavioral health quality measurement has centered on process and access — ensuring people get in the door, receive follow-up care, and stay engaged. These measures, established by gold-standard organizations, such as NCQA and CMS, have been essential in creating consistency across the industry.

But the field now faces a pivotal moment.

“Access matters. It always will. But access isn’t the same as improvement,” said ABHW President and CEO Debbie Witchey. **“If we are serious about transforming behavioral health, we must be willing to ask the next question: What good is access if it doesn’t help people get better?”**

ABHW member plans bring an unparalleled view into what works, drawing on millions of lives, thousands of providers, and years of data. They agree that today’s recognized measures are necessary, but not sufficient for a system that aims to deliver real recovery, stability, and long-term wellness.

“These measures are a starting point, not the finish line,” Witchey said. “The industry has relied on the same access-driven metrics for years. **This is the moment to push ourselves — and our partners across the field — to elevate outcomes, not just activity.**”

Reaffirming Proven Measures While Challenging the Field to Go Further

The measures highlighted today remain essential indicators of access and continuity:

- Follow-up after emergency department visits for mental illness and substance use disorder
- Follow-up after high-intensity care for substance use disorder
- Antidepressant medication management
- Adherence to antipsychotic medications for people with schizophrenia

These measures reduce hospitalizations, improve stability, and support early intervention. **Yet, they do not answer the most important question: is the care working?**

ABHW members are committed to advancing measurements that capture:

- Symptom improvement
- Functioning and stability
- Recovery and relapse prevention
- Plan member-defined goals and outcomes
- Effectiveness of evidence-based care

“This is a call to action,” Witchey said. “We are asking NCQA, CMS, and the full behavioral health ecosystem to move with us toward measures that reflect what truly matters: whether people feel better, do better, and live better.”

Continuing the Work with National Leaders

ABHW will continue its collaboration with organizations, including the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute and West Health, to develop and promote measures that reflect both access and meaningful improvement.

As behavioral health needs grow nationwide, ABHW and its member plans are committed to transparency, accountability, and evidence-based care that delivers real change.

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ABOUT THE ASSOCIATION FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

ABHW is the leading health plan association working to improve access and quality of care for mental health and substance use disorders. ABHW’s members include national and regional health plans that care for 200 million people. Together, we work to reduce stigma and advance federal policy on mental health and substance use disorder care. ABHW member companies – Aetna, a CVS Health Company; CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield; Caredon Behavioral Health, an Elevance Health Company; Centene Corporation; Evernorth; Kaiser Permanente; Lucet; Magellan Health; Molina Healthcare; Optum; and PerformCare, a subsidiary of AmeriHealth Caritas. To learn more, visit www.abhw.org and follow us on X and LinkedIn.