



# 2025

# ANNUAL REPORT

Breaking Barriers. Building Wellness.

# ABOUT ABHW

ABHW is dedicated to advancing policy and raising awareness around mental health and substance use disorders. By advocating for solutions on behalf of health plans, we work to ensure high-quality, evidence-based care, reduce disparities, and improve whole-person outcomes for individuals and communities.

ABHW is the national voice for payers that manage behavioral health insurance benefits. ABHW member companies provide coverage to 200 million people in both the public and private sectors for mental health, substance use disorders, and other behaviors that affect health and wellness.

Founded in 1994, ABHW is a respected leader in behavioral health and health care policy. ABHW provides thought leadership and advocates for regulations and policies that expand access to high quality care, promote healthy living, and improve quality of life.

## ABHW Guiding Pillars



Increase access to timely, quality, and appropriate care



Foster evidence-based treatment and innovation



Drive integration



Raise awareness and reduce stigma



Support prevention



Advance health equity

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# Letter from the President and CEO

I am proud to share the progress the Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness made in 2025. This year, ABHW helped drive policies that strengthen integration, expand continuity of care, and improve affordability across the behavioral health system.

We are working toward a future where mental health and substance use disorders are treated with the same urgency, seriousness, and commitment as physical health. That means reducing stigma, advancing quality, and pursuing practical solutions to today's public health challenges.

In 2025, we responded to our members' evolving needs by engaging in high-impact policy discussions, supporting sustainable telehealth access, advancing workable parity implementation, and promoting measurement-informed, outcomes-driven care. We champion evidence-based solutions that improve access, quality, and outcomes.

As we look to 2026, ABHW will continue to build momentum. We will continue working with members, partners, and policymakers to break down barriers, strengthen the behavioral health system, and advance evidence-based care that delivers better results and affordability for patients and families. Together, we are building a stronger, more connected future for behavioral health care.



*DEBBIE WITHEY*

**Debbie Withey**

President and CEO  
Association for Behavioral Health  
and Wellness



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# 2025 At a Glance



Secured **SUPPORT Act** reauthorization protecting critical addiction treatment programs



Helped drive **expanded tele prescribing access** for buprenorphine to treat opioid use disorder



Influenced **Rural Health Transformation Fund** plans to expand rural services



Successfully advocated **extending tele prescribing flexibilities** through 2026 to protect treatment access



**Advanced Medicare** policies supporting behavioral health integration and collaborative care



Delivered **workable federal parity reform** recommendations to strengthen oversight and compliance



**Shaped federal policy** through 21 comment letters and 14 coalitions



Educated nearly **all freshman congressional health staff** on behavioral health



Launched expert series **advancing prevention** and family-centered behavioral health



Led **national campaigns** for Recovery Month, Suicide Prevention Month, 988 Day, and Mental Health Awareness Month across media, blogs, and social media

In 2025, ABHW advanced behavioral health by shaping policy, expanding access to evidence-based affordable care, educating policymakers, and leading national efforts to reduce stigma and strengthen prevention and early intervention.

# Shaping Behavioral Health Policy Impact

## **SUPPORT Act Reauthorization**

ABHW advocated for reauthorization of the SUPPORT Act through a series of press releases issued on April 29, June 4, and September 18, 2025. In the fall, Congress passed the legislation, and on December 1, President Donald Trump signed it into law.

The SUPPORT Act reauthorizes critical federal programs addressing substance use disorders and co-occurring mental health conditions, helping expand access to lifesaving treatment and continue progress in reducing overdose deaths.



## **Buprenorphine Tele prescribing Final Rule**

On December 30, the DEA and HHS announced implementation of the Buprenorphine Tele prescribing Final Rule, *Expansion of Buprenorphine Treatment via Telemedicine Encounter*. ABHW urged Congress to act on this issue throughout the year and issued press releases on January 16 and November 20, 2025.

The final rule permanently expands access to treatment for opioid use disorder by allowing initial six-month buprenorphine prescriptions through audio-video and audio-only telemedicine, subject to key guardrails.

You can read our summary of the final rule [here](#).

## DEA Tele prescribing Extended Through 2026

On December 30, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of Health and Human Services issued a fourth temporary extension of COVID-19 telemedicine flexibilities, effective January 1 through December 31, 2026. ABHW and other stakeholders advocated for this extension. This extension preserves access to tele prescribing of Schedule II through V controlled medications for behavioral health conditions while the agencies work to finalize a permanent special registration framework. It helps maintain continuity of timely, evidence-based treatment and supports ongoing overdose prevention and recovery efforts.

## Physician Fee Schedule

CMS released the CY 2026 Medicare Physician Fee Schedule final rule, effective January 1, 2026. The final rule largely reflects CMS's July 2025 proposal and includes several significant wins for behavioral health in areas where ABHW actively advocated.

A full list of key provisions ABHW supported can be viewed [here](#).

Supervising physicians are now permanently allowed to meet direct supervision requirements through real-time audio-video telehealth. Teaching physicians may also participate virtually in all teaching settings and in specific clinical situations. CMS also created optional add-on codes for primary care practices to streamline billing for Behavioral Health Integration and the Psychiatric Collaborative Care Model.



## **Part 2 Advocacy and Medicaid Community Engagement Work Requirements**

On December 9, ABHW, the American Society of Addiction Medicine, and the National Association for Behavioral Health met with subject matter experts from CMS's Children and Adults Health Programs Group to discuss implementation of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act's (OBBBA, H.R. 1) Medicaid community engagement requirements and the substance use disorder exemption.

ABHW highlighted ongoing confusion among health care stakeholders regarding implementation of 42 CFR Part 2 privacy protections. ABHW urged CMS to clarify in writing that when a patient has already provided Part 2 consent for treatment, payment, or health care operations, that consent should also allow use of the information to determine eligibility for the substance use disorder exemption from work and community engagement requirements.

ABHW also raised this issue with the HHS Office for Civil Rights and provided additional information at their request.

This advocacy will continue into 2026. These recommendations would promote consistent interpretation, reduce administrative burden, and free up more resources for patient care. They would also help ensure OBBBA strengthens communities, protects individuals with behavioral health disorders, and advances evidence-based, person-centered Medicaid policy.

To clarify our recommendations, ABHW also [created this document](#).

## **Mental Health Parity Reform**

On December 5, after meetings and discussions with stakeholders and government officials throughout the year, ABHW [submitted a recommendations](#) letter to the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and the Treasury outlining constructive steps to strengthen the mental health and substance use disorder parity compliance process.

ABHW's recommendations are intended to support a final parity framework that complies with the law and is practical for plans, regulators, and providers to implement. Our goal is to work collaboratively with policymakers and stakeholders to help ensure that parity rules are clear, workable, and achievable so they can be successfully implemented and improve access to care.

The recommendations include issuing a targeted parity rule for notice and comment, establishing compliance safe harbors based on outcome metrics, creating an appeals process for findings of noncompliance, recognizing third-party mental health and substance use disorder accreditation standards as evidence of compliance, and forming a Federal Advisory Committee to develop ongoing parity compliance tools.

ABHW remains committed to working transparently with federal agencies and other stakeholders to help resolve outstanding issues and support a final parity rule that strengthens oversight while ensuring the requirements are workable and sustainable.

## **State BH Progress Through the Rural Health Transformation Fund**

The Rural Health Transformation Fund is an important step toward ensuring rural communities have equitable access to high-quality behavioral health care. In November, ABHW submitted **recommendations** to CMS on implementation of the Medicaid Rural Health Transformation Fund.



ABHW made recommendations on interoperability and electronic health records, rural crisis services and mobile teams, peer support specialists, medications for addiction treatment, strengthening rural hospital and behavioral health clinic capacity, workforce development and licensure compacts, and telehealth and broadband.

ABHW also urged states to invest in technology and electronic health record adoption for mental health and substance use disorder providers, who were excluded from earlier federal health information technology incentives.

Here are the areas where ABHW's recommendations appeared in or helped shape state Rural Health Transformation Fund plans.

## Advocacy in Action

ABHW actively shaped policy by submitting 21 comment letters and joining 14 group sign-on letters, ensuring the perspectives of behavioral health payers were represented in key legislation and regulatory decisions.



## Investing in New Leadership in Congress and the Administration

ABHW educated nearly all freshman Members of Congress' Health Legislative Assistants on behavioral health, our organization, and our role as a trusted policy resource. By building these relationships early, we strengthened connections with policymakers and invested in our country's new behavioral health leadership. Resources such as our [Behavioral Health 101](#) guide supported this effort.

We also proactively engaged key administrative leaders to lay the groundwork for policy influence, meeting with HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., CMS, Department of Labor transition teams, the Domestic Policy Council, SAMHSA, and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Technology Policy. These early discussions helped ABHW establish relationships and reinforce its role as a trusted resource across the administration.

# Elevating the National Conversation on Behavioral Health

ABHW expanded its media engagement in 2025, issuing 18 press releases and strengthening relationships with journalists to keep behavioral health issues at the forefront of the national conversation. ABHW leadership was regularly sought out by reporters and cited in national coverage, including Behavioral Health Business, Mental Health Weekly, and Becker's Payer Issues. Through this visibility, ABHW continued to advocate for reduced stigma and improved quality of care for mental health and substance use disorders.

ABHW also increased its visibility across the behavioral health field through a growing number of speaking engagements and conference appearances. In 2025, ABHW team members delivered 24 speaking engagements, sharing insights and advancing conversations on behavioral health policy, innovation, and quality of care. These appearances further reinforced ABHW's position as a trusted voice and leader in the national behavioral health landscape.

## **Championing Awareness and Reducing Stigma Year-Round**

Throughout the year, ABHW used national observances to raise awareness of behavioral health issues, promote recovery, and connect individuals and families with resources.

During **National Recovery Month**, ABHW highlighted the importance of supporting the millions of Americans living with substance use disorders. ABHW President and CEO Debbie Witchey recorded a video recognizing the nearly 48 million Americans affected and underscoring the urgent need for care that is accessible, integrated, and free from stigma. ABHW also led a month-long social media campaign through **Stamp Out Stigma**, sharing powerful recovery stories and offering resources for people seeking treatment or supporting loved ones.



For **Suicide Prevention Month**, ABHW amplified national awareness efforts and highlighted critical suicide prevention resources. ABHW interviewed Vibrant Emotional Health, administrator of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, for a blog titled *How the 988 Lifeline Is Evolving to Meet Community Needs*. The discussion examined early challenges, efforts to reduce staffing shortages and wait times, work to expand inclusive support, and coordination with 911, mobile crisis teams, and local providers.

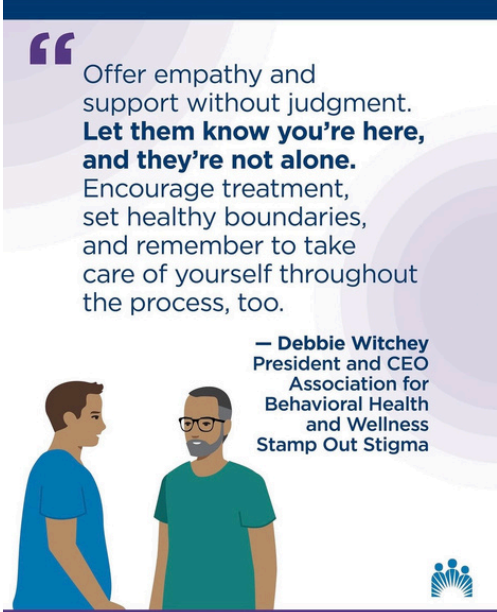
ABHW also published a blog, *Supporting Mental Health and Saving Lives*, which explored the connection between suicide and mental health conditions and encouraged open conversations about mental health challenges. Throughout the month, ABHW amplified national campaigns using the hashtags #SPM25 and #BeThere to broaden awareness and extend lifesaving information to diverse audiences.



ABHW joined partners across the behavioral health community to mark **988 Day** and highlight the importance of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Through coordinated social media engagement and national conversations, ABHW contributed to nearly 5,000 posts on social media between September 1 and September 9. Media coverage across print, online, television, and radio generated an estimated reach of more than 8 billion people between August 27 and September 8.

To mark **World Mental Health Day** on October 10, ABHW participated in Kaiser Permanente's #PresenceOfMind campaign, which raises awareness about mental health and suicide prevention. Debbie Witchey, ABHW board member Dr. Doug Nemecek, Chief Medical Officer at Evernorth, and ABHW member Dr. Steven Pratt, Chief Medical Officer at Magellan Health, shared insights on suicide prevention, mental health literacy, and substance use recovery through campaign videos and social media engagement. Campaign content appeared on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

During **Mental Health Awareness Month**, ABHW and Stamp Out Stigma joined a national X chat hosted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Children's Hospital Association to discuss the impact of Medicaid on behavioral health care access. ABHW also participated in Kaiser Permanente's #PresenceOfMind campaign, which encouraged parents to prioritize their mental health and connect with supportive resources. Throughout the month, ABHW amplified key messages through a coordinated social media campaign promoting awareness, resources, and stigma reduction.



“ Offer empathy and support without judgment. **Let them know you're here, and they're not alone.** Encourage treatment, set healthy boundaries, and remember to take care of yourself throughout the process, too.

— Debbie Witchey  
President and CEO  
Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness  
Stamp Out Stigma

The graphic features a quote in a white box on a blue background. Below the quote is an illustration of two men in blue and green shirts talking. A small logo of a sunburst is in the bottom right corner.



2025  
**MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH**

STAMP OUT STIGMA

The graphic has a dark green background with white text. It includes the year 2025, the main title 'MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH', and the 'STAMP OUT STIGMA' logo.



share your story

STAMP OUT STIGMA

The graphic has a green background with white text and a dotted line. It includes the phrase 'share your story' and the 'STAMP OUT STIGMA' logo.

## **Leadership in Children, Youth, Maternal, and Whole Family Behavioral Health**

ABHW continued to demonstrate national leadership in advancing behavioral health solutions that support children, youth, mothers, and families. Through expert thought leadership, partnerships with leading clinicians and policymakers, and convenings that elevate evidence-based practices, ABHW highlighted the importance of early identification, prevention, coordinated care, and family-centered solutions.

## **Best Practices for Children and Youth Behavioral Health Blog Series**

ABHW launched its *Best Practices for Children and Youth Behavioral Health* blog series, featuring insights from leading experts and ABHW board members. Through this series, experts addressed critical questions about caring for children and youth and highlighted approaches that improve outcomes for families.

The first article, *How Experts Define Quality Care for Children and Youth Behavioral Health*, highlighted early identification and timely access to care as essential drivers of improved outcomes. It emphasized mental health screenings, evidence-based treatment, coordinated support systems, and sustained care that helps families access the right services at the right time.

The second article, *Evidence-Based Approaches to Prevention in Children and Youth Behavioral Health*, explored how recognizing and addressing early behavioral changes can reduce the risk of more serious challenges later in life. It underscored the value of prevention-focused, evidence-based strategies in supporting long-term behavioral health.

The third article, *Putting Children First in Prescribing Decisions*, focused on what it means to place children at the center of every prescribing decision. It outlined best practices that prioritize careful clinical evaluation, family involvement, and the safest path to effective treatment.

## **Advancing Collaboration to Strengthen Children and Youth Behavioral Health Systems**

ABHW also supported broader dialogue on improving behavioral health systems for children and youth through an article originally published in *AACAP News*. The article highlights how health plans, providers, and policymakers can work together to improve access to care, invest in prevention, and build stronger systems for children and youth. ABHW is grateful to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry for its leadership and dedication to improving care for young people and families.

## **Elevating Maternal Mental Health and Suicide Prevention**

On September 9, ABHW cosponsored a reception hosted by the Policy Center for Maternal Mental Health titled *To Milestones and Momentum: Maternal Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*. The event highlighted progress in advancing maternal mental health awareness while identifying opportunities to further prevent maternal suicide.



## **Exploring Whole Family Behavioral Health Solutions**

ABHW convened a webinar exploring the critical connections between maternal mental health and children's and youth's behavioral health. As behavioral health challenges among mothers and children continue to rise, the discussion focused on policies and care models that support the well-being of the entire family. Panelists discussed the unique behavioral health needs of mothers, the impact of maternal mental health on family dynamics, the challenges faced by children and youth, and federal policy opportunities to improve services for families.

## Stamp Out Stigma

Mental health and substance use disorder diagnoses are more prevalent than heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, migraines, osteoporosis, and asthma, yet misunderstanding and misinformation still prevent many people from seeking help or speaking openly about their experiences.



Stamp Out Stigma, an ABHW initiative, works to change perceptions and reduce stigma by encouraging people to talk openly about mental health and substance use disorders. [Learn more.](#)

## Expanding Our Reach to Advance Modern Behavioral Health Solutions

ABHW strengthened its communications platforms this year to expand our reach and ensure policymakers and stakeholders could more easily access timely information, insights, and resources that advance modern behavioral health care.

ABHW's Monthly Digest remained a key channel for sharing policy updates, research, and thought leadership. This year, the newsletter significantly grew its subscriber base, reaching a broader audience of policymakers, health care leaders, and advocates across the behavioral health community.

ABHW also launched a refreshed website designed to make content easier to find and more accessible to users. While maintaining ABHW's familiar look and branding, the updated site features improved navigation and organization, a smoother experience across devices, and stronger engagement with ABHW's work.

# Partnerships & Collaboration

Advancing meaningful behavioral health solutions requires collaboration across the health care ecosystem. ABHW works closely with provider organizations, health plans, advocacy groups, and policymakers to align stakeholders, share expertise, and drive progress in behavioral health care.

ABHW regularly engages with leading behavioral health organizations, including the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute, and Zero Suicide Institute, to share expertise and advance solutions that strengthen the behavioral health system.

ABHW also partners with organizations across behavioral health and the broader health care community, including Medicaid Health Plans of America, Alliance of Community Health Plans, National Association for Behavioral Healthcare, The Kennedy Forum, Mental Health America, and the National Association of ACOs to advance shared priorities and strengthen behavioral health care.

ABHW also holds leadership roles in coalitions, including the Mental Health Liaison Group, as co-chair of the Health Policy Committee and Telehealth Workgroup, and Health Policy Committee, and co-chairs the Health Standards Committee of URAC, helping shape policies and standards that promote high-quality care.



# ABHW

## MEMBER COMPANIES

ABHW members include leading national and regional health plans that cover 200 million people across the public and private sectors. Our member companies bring substantial expertise in mental health and substance use disorders, integration, patient-centered treatment, and recovery, and they lead the industry in preventive and collaborative models of care.

### MEMBERS

Aetna, A CVS Health Company

CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield

Carelon Behavioral Health, an Elevance Company

Centene Corporation

Evernorth

Kaiser Permanente

Lucet

Magellan Health

Molina Healthcare

Optum

PerformCare, a subsidiary of AmeriHealth Caritas



# ABHW

# CORPORATE PARTNERS

ABHW's Corporate Partners Program supports critical behavioral health issues. Corporate Partners have the opportunity to advise health plans on public policy priorities, focus on areas of shared concern, and engage key behavioral health executives to improve access, quality, and outcomes.

## 2025 CORPORATE PARTNERS

Boehringer Ingelheim

COMPASS Pathways

Guardian Recovery

Indivior

Johnson & Johnson

Lyssn

MCG Health

Definium Therapeutics, formerly MindMed

Onos Health

Rula

Trayt Health

## 2025 POLICY LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

ABHW is excited to launch the Policy Leadership Circle, a new partnership opportunity for select organizations to engage directly with the policy leaders and government affairs experts shaping the national behavioral health and wellness agenda.

Through the program, partners gain insight into ABHW's policy development, regulatory strategy, and advocacy efforts while contributing expertise to key discussions. The Policy Leadership Circle provides a platform for organizations to strengthen visibility among industry and government stakeholders and help shape policies that drive innovation, access, and quality in behavioral health care.



Advancing Health Care Policy for  
Mental Health & Substance Use Disorders

Thank you to our members, partners, and allies who make this work possible. Together, we are building a future where everyone can live healthy, fulfilling lives.

[www.abhw.org](http://www.abhw.org) | [info@abhw.org](mailto:info@abhw.org)

