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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**CALOPTIMA HEALTH ADDRESSES YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS
WITH \$25.5 MILLION FOR SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS**

Funding will support new mental health resources for nearly half a million Orange County students

ORANGE, Calif. (May 8, 2023) — CalOptima Health’s Board of Directors approved up to \$25.5 million in funding for all 29 Orange County school districts to boost access to behavioral health care for K–12 children and offer innovative services at school. This significant investment is made as Student Mental Health Awareness Week begins on Monday (May 8–12) to address the growing mental health crisis among kids and teens.

This funding is available through a statewide initiative called the Student Behavioral Health Incentive Program (SBHIP), and CalOptima Health has worked collaboratively with the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE), the school districts and other stakeholders on SBHIP since 2022. Together, the groups completed the required needs assessment to identify students’ behavioral health needs and service gaps to be eligible for the funding. CalOptima Health’s Board authorized distribution of the funding now, prior to receipt of the incentive dollars from the state.

“Our children are facing unprecedented levels of stressors, and the need for timely and effective mental health support has never been greater,” said Carmen Katsarov, LPCC, CCM, CalOptima Health’s Executive Director of Behavioral Health Integration. “It’s alarming that suicide rates for children aged 10–18 increased 20% between 2019–20. We know the pandemic made this even more dire. The time to act is now, so we can ensure the health and well-being of our community’s children.”

Of the \$25.5 million, the school districts will receive up to \$10 million for various initiatives, including hiring additional behavioral health clinical staff, such as social workers, school counselors and school psychologists; enhancing training and development; and implementing electronic health record and billing systems.

Up to \$12.5 million will be allocated to interventions provided by Hazel Health, Children’s Hospital of Orange County (CHOC) and Western Youth Services (WYS).

- Hazel Health will receive up to \$8.4 million to implement a behavioral health telehealth platform that all 442,000 Orange County students (uninsured, Medi-Cal and privately insured) can access to receive behavioral health telehealth counseling services.
- CHOC will receive up to \$2.1 million for a variety of activities, including 10 new WellSpaces, which are sites at schools that offer quiet respite for students in need. In addition, CHOC will add staff to link schools to CHOC for in-person or telehealth mental health services. CHOC will also provide mental health services for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and an autism care program for students between the ages of 12 and 17.

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- WYS will receive up to \$800,000 to develop a behavioral health curriculum and train selected school staff on screening and early intervention strategies for behavioral health issues.

“In California, rates of anxiety and depression among children have increased dramatically,” said Richard Pitts, D.O., Ph.D., CalOptima Health’s Chief Medical Officer. “Bringing WellSpaces, a behavioral health curriculum and access to counseling directly to the schools will have a profound impact on the mental health of our students and help close the gap in services.”

“We are grateful for CalOptima Health’s forward-thinking approach in providing vital mental health support directly to schools,” said Dr. Ramon Miramontes, OCDE Deputy Superintendent of Educational Services. “This program will empower educators and schools to offer necessary assistance to help students thrive. OCDE is proud to serve as a thought partner in enabling districts to build robust systems of support and bill directly to CalOptima Health and insurance companies.”

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About CalOptima Health

A county-organized health system, CalOptima Health provides publicly funded health care coverage for low-income children, adults, seniors, and people with disabilities in Orange County, California. CalOptima Health’s mission is to serve member health with excellence and dignity, respecting the value and needs of each person. CalOptima Health serves more than 978,000 members with a network of nearly 9,600 primary care doctors and specialists and 45 acute and rehab hospitals.