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Primary Care Providers Play Crucial Role in Combating Youth Mental Health Crisis

New study examines trends in treatment and diagnoses of Major Depressive Disorder in more than one million youth

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Mountlake Terrace, Wash.—Primary care physicians are often the first providers to diagnose Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) in young people, according to a new study from the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association's Health of America initiative.

The study analyzed data from more than one million Blue Cross and Blue Shield (BCBS) commercially insured youth ages 6 to 17 across the country who have been diagnosed with MDD. Results showed that 41 percent of diagnoses originate in primary care settings. In Washington specifically, the study found that 50 percent of youth diagnosed with MDD were first diagnosed by a primary care provider.

MDD, also known as clinical depression, is a mental health condition characterized by persistently low mood and loss of interest in activities that once brought joy. According to the Centers for Disease Control, this condition is more common in adolescents than adults. The Department of Health and Human Services also reports almost half of youth experience a mental health condition at some point in their life.

The study from Blue Cross Blue Shield Association also found:

- The prevalence of MDD in teens ages 15 to 17 doubled from 2019 to 2022.
- Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander youth, as well as youth facing barriers to care, are underdiagnosed until symptoms escalate to a crisis event, like an ER visit or mental health-related hospitalization.

"Removing barriers to care is critical to addressing the youth mental health crisis," said Dr. Romilla Batra, Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer at Premera Blue Cross. "At Premera, we're focusing on solutions that meet youth where they are. For many young people, their first touchpoint for care is their primary care physician. Expanding primary care access, integrating mental health services, and supporting local partnerships are all essential to helping Washington's youth thrive."

Premera Blue Cross is broadening access to both primary care and mental health care through several initiatives, including:

- **Partnering with Kinwell clinics**: Kinwell Medical Group operates 17 clinics across the state, plus a statewide virtual care clinic, for Premera Blue Cross members. Kinwell's

integrated approach to care means patients can address mental health concerns with their primary care provider, lowering barriers to diagnosis and care. These clinicians can help children, teens, and adults, and are supported by Kinwell's behavioral health specialists.

- **Integrating care into the community:** Through Premera's investment in the AIMS Center at the University of Washington School of Medicine, three clinics serving a higher population of Black and African American patients received funds to implement the Collaborative Care model. This care model, developed by UW, helps patients receive care for their mental health in the same setting they are treated for their physical health. Clinics included HopeCentral pediatrics clinic in south Seattle, and Northwest Medical Specialties in Tacoma and Federal Way.

- **Connecting members through Matchmaker™ for Behavioral Health**: Premera members who use this program receive a curated list from the Matchmaker team of in-network behavioral and mental health clinicians. The list is tailored to the member's specific needs and only includes providers who are accepting new patients. The Matchmaker team can source providers for adults and youth anywhere in the country. Lists are provided to members at no cost if they have access to the program through their plan.

- **Providing personalized, one-on-one member support:** The Personal Health Support program at Premera offers members access to a team of personal health support clinicians (PHSCs), which includes licensed mental health professionals. These clinicians leverage Premera's market-leading, integrated case management model to meet members where they are. This work includes:
    - Assessing a member's whole health, looking at both physical and mental health conditions and barriers to health improvement.
    - Assisting with timely access to quality mental health care that meets a member's unique needs.
    - Ensuring access to a primary care provider to address both physical and mental health conditions.
    - Connecting members with community resources to help with financial, transportation, social, or cultural needs.

  PHSCs also track progress to ensure a member's mental health is improving. This year, Premera saw a 31 percent decrease in depression symptoms and 25 percent decrease in anxiety symptoms for Personal Health Support participants via member self-reporting through nationally recognized screening tools.

The findings in this report underscore the need for action to improve youth mental health in America. Together with providers, other Blue Cross Blue Shield plans, and community partners, Premera is committed to a multi-faceted approach to provide America's youth with the tools they need to navigate the challenges they face in school, at home and in their everyday lives.

For more information about Premera's approach to mental health care, visit Premera.com/MentalHealth.

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About Premera Blue Cross
Premera Blue Cross, a not-for-profit, independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association based in Mountlake Terrace, Wash., is a leading health plan in the Pacific Northwest, providing comprehensive health benefits and tailored services to more than 2.7 million people, from individuals to Fortune 100 companies.

About the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association
The Blue Cross Blue Shield Association is a national federation of independent, community-based and locally operated Blue Cross and Blue Shield companies that collectively provide health care coverage for one in three Americans. BCBSA provides health care insights through The Health of America Report series and the national BCBS Health Index℠. For more information on BCBSA and its member companies, please visit bcbs.com.