

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

The Behavioral Health Advisory Board (BHAB/Board) convened a meeting at the Stephen P. Clark Government Center, 111 Northwest 1st Street, Miami, Florida 33128, in 2nd Floor, Commission Chambers, on September 22, 2025 at 10:00 am.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Garcia called the meeting to order at 10:01 AM.

II. ROLL CALL & INTRODUCTIONS

The following BHAB members were present:

- ~ Dr. Tiffany Amrich, Psychologist, Community Action and Human Services Department (CAHSD);
- ~ Major Melissa Barosela, Miami-Dade Police Department;
- ~ Ms. Karen Annunziato, State Attorney's Office;
- ~ Ms. Victoria L. Mallette, Homeless Trust;
- ~ Mr. Carlos J. Martinez, Miami-Dade Public Defender;
- ~ Ms. Lauren Rabbitto, Juvenile Services Department;
- ~ Ms. Edith C. Wright, Miami-Dade Corrections & Rehabilitation Department;
- ~ Mr. Duane Pearson; Miami Dade Fire Rescue;
- ~ Ms. Lourdes Dorado, Department of Children and Families;
- ~ Mr. Claudio Perez, Behavioral Health Service;
- ~ Mr. William Delaney, Behavioral Health Service;
- ~ Mr. Alfredo Hernandez;
- ~ Ms. Michelle Fernandez;
- ~ Ms. Susan Holtzman;
- ~ Ms. Carolyn Acosta;
- ~ Judge Nushin Sayfie, Representative from Judicial System;
- ~ Mr. Gustavo Cruz, Veteran Services;
- ~ Mr. Luis Espinosa, Retired Fireman/First Responder; and
- ~ Chairman Rene Garcia, Miami-Dade County Board of County Commissioner

Ms. Amanda Dominguez announced that Ms. Miriam Stewart, Ms. Laura Naredo, Mr. Christopher Wing, and Dr. Joseph Poitier were excused.

In addition to the BHAB members, the following staff members were present:

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

- ~ Ms. Tania Avellanet, Assistant Director, CAHSD;
- ~ Ms. Amanda Dominguez, Mental Health Facility Program Manager/BHAB Liaison, CAHSD;
- ~ Assistant County Attorney (ACA) Shanika Graves;
- ~ Mr. Eduardo Tamborrel, Administrative Officer II, CAHSD;
- ~ Mr. Daniel Wall, Director, Grants Coordination, Office of Management and Budget (OMB);
- ~ Ms. Cathy Burgos, Chief Community Services Officer, Office of the Mayor; and
- ~ Ms. Tomeka Law, Deputy Clerk, Clerk of the Board.

Chairman Garcia observed a moment of silence in honor of the late Dr. Luis Hines, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

III. PUBLIC'S REASONABLE OPPORTUNITY TO BE HEARD

Chairman Garcia opened the reasonable opportunity to be heard, and the following person appeared before the Board:

Mr. Theo Karansalis, 289 Shadow Way, Miami Springs, Florida, expressed support for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMIB and BHAB member Susan Holtzman while sharing highlights from the recent Florida NAMI conference in Orlando, which featured prominent speakers and focused on the theme "Stronger Together." He noted that Miami's attendance was reduced this year due to budget constraints but encouraged stronger participation in future conferences. Mr. Karansalis announced his completion of NAMI Ending the Silence presenter training and emphasized the alignment between the Commission on Disability Issues (CODI) and the Board's mission, expressing hope to build a collaborative partnership. He concluded by thanking Senator Garcia for his appointment to the CODI seat.

Ms. Holtzman thanked Mr. Karansalis for his remarks and explained that Miami-Dade County's NAMI State funding was completely eliminated this year due to Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) content on the national website, forcing the organization to cut all non-essential travel. She advised that Ms. Jackie Fernandez attended the NAMI Florida conference in her place to address legislative matters at the State level, while the conference's overlap with the County budget hearing further limited attendance. Ms. Holtzman acknowledged the organization's reduced presence but encouraged Board members to attend future conferences, expressing optimism for stronger participation next year.

Seeing no one else come forward to speak, Chairman Garcia closed the reasonable opportunity to be heard.

MOTION TO SET AGENDA

Mr. Claudio Perez moved that the Board approve today's BHAB agenda, as presented. This motion was seconded by Mr. Carlos Martinez, and upon being put to a vote, passed 19-0 (Ms. Miriam Stewart, Ms. Laura Naredo, Mr. Christopher Wing, and Dr. Joseph Poitier were absent).

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

IV. COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

a. Brave Health: Mr. Alex Areces and Ms. Yomayra Mora-Perea gave a presentation on Brave Health, highlighting the following:

- **Organization Mission and Background:** Brave Health, established in 2017, is a virtual mental health services provider with a mission to significantly expand access to quality mental health services for all;
- **Service Areas:** Currently serving patients in 12 states including Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, **New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia;**
- **Services Offered:** Medication Management, Individual Therapy, Clinical Led Groups and Family & Couples Counselling;
- **Insurance Coverage:** Accepts Medicaid, Medicare, and Commercial insurance plans;
- **Key Service Features:** 100% virtual platform with full-time W2 providers, longitudinal patient care, fast access (typically under 7 days), no app required, SMS scheduling, and web-based video sessions;
- **Specialized Programs:** Tailored clinical services for adolescents (13+), serious mental illness, maternal mental health, chronic illness, transitions of care, families and teens in foster care, suicide prevention, seniors, assisted living/homebound populations, and co-occurring substance use disorder;
- **Referral Process:** Three-step process including connection to care (within 1-2 hours), comprehensive assessment, and treatment implementation with automated notifications to referrers at each milestone; and
- **Performance Metrics:** 73% reduction in behavioral health admissions, 37% treated rate, Net Promoter Score of 77, average 4.5-6.8 days to first appointment, and average 7-month length of care

b. NAMI: Ms. Susan Holtzman, President and CEO, NAMI Miami-Dade County presented a overview of the organization's programs and community impact, highlighting the following:

- **Organization Mission and Background:**
Local Miami-Dade affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the largest grassroots mental health organization in the United States
Mission: Dedicated to improving the quality of life for people with mental illness and their families through support, education, and advocacy
All programming provided completely free to all participants
Supported by staff members and trained volunteers who are family members and peers with lived experience
- **Mental Health Statistics - National:**
1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year
79% of people who die by suicide are male
50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24
- **Mental Health Statistics - Miami-Dade County:**
County average: 12.4% of adults stated their mental health was not good for 14 or more days
Cities that are predominantly African American had much higher rates: Florida City (22.5%), Gladeview (21.8%), Brownsville (21.2%), and Opa-Locka (20.6%)

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

- Compare to more affluent areas: Key Biscayne (8.4%) and Surfside (9.2%)
- **NAMI's Three Pillars - Education Programs:**
 - Ending the Silence (youth, families, and staff modules)
 - NAMI on Campus (student-led chapters at University of Miami, Miami-Dade College, FIU, Florida Memorial University, FAU, and Belen Jesuit Preparatory School)
 - Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) suicide prevention training
 - Peer-to-Peer Program (8-session virtual program for adults with mental health conditions)
 - Additional programs: NAMI 101, Stigma Free Workplace, and Family to Family
- **NAMI's Three Pillars - Support Services:**
 - Helpline/WarmLine: 305-665-2540, weekdays 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, multilingual (Spanish, French, Portuguese, Creole)
 - 8-9 weekly virtual support groups for peers, young adults, families, and caregivers in English and Spanish
 - Peer Mentor and Family Mentor Programs providing one-on-one sessions for up to 6 months
- **NAMI's Three Pillars - Advocacy:**
 - County Level: Works with Miami-Dade County government, municipal governments, and police departments
 - State Level: Joins with other Florida NAMI affiliates to lobby for funding
 - National Level: Lobbies Florida representatives in Washington for federal mental health funding
- **Outreach in Underserved Communities:**
 - Targeted outreach in predominantly African American communities with highest mental health burden rates
 - Partnerships with faith-based organizations and community centers in Opa-Locka, Brownsville, Florida City, and Gladeview
- **Program Outcomes:**
 - 72.2% of youth participants in Ending the Silence improved protective factors and reduced stigma
 - 79.8% of QPR participants improved protective factors regarding suicide prevention
 - 87% of support group participants maintained increased sense of connection
 - 83% maintained improved wellbeing
- **Volunteer Opportunities - Join the Team**
- **Contact Information**

Following Ms. Holtzman's presentation on NAMI Miami-Dade County's services, Chairman Garcia opened the floor for questions and expressed particular interest in understanding how NAMI's peer support helpline operated. He emphasized that peer support had proven to be extremely important for individuals experiencing mental health challenges and asked for details about the helpline's functionality, call volume, and staffing structure.

Ms. Holtzman explained that NAMI's helpline operated Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM and was staffed entirely by trained peers who answered calls in real-time. She clarified that the helpline was not a crisis line but rather served as a resource for information, support, and navigation assistance. Ms. Holtzman advised that the trained peer staff helped callers with a wide range of needs, from locating therapists and understanding insurance coverage to navigating the Baker Act process. She noted that

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

while NAMI did not provide direct referrals to specific providers, staff members guided callers toward appropriate resources based on their individual circumstances and insurance coverage.

In response to questions about serving different populations, Ms. Holtzman described NAMI's specialized support structure. She explained that the organization maintained connections to a National Youth Line for youth-specific concerns and employed specialized Family Peer staff who connected family members with NAMI's Family-to-Family Education program and other support services. Additionally, NAMI offered a Peer-to-Peer program that taught individuals with mental health conditions how to self-advocate, navigate the mental health care system, and manage family dynamics. Ms. Holtzman emphasized that these peer-led programs created powerful connections and networks that were instrumental in supporting recovery and treatment adherence.

Mr. Alfredo Hernandez then announced NAMI's national helpline number for the record: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264).

Mr. Claudio Perez asked whether NAMI's helpline was linked to the 988 national suicide and crisis line.

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Ms. Holtzman clarified that while the two helplines were not directly linked, they worked collaboratively through a system of referrals and warm handoffs between organizations. She explained that NAMI had recently secured funding to launch a comprehensive suicide prevention campaign promoting the 988 number, which featured prominent local partnerships with the Miami Heat, the Miami Marlins, the Miami Dolphins, and the mayor's office. Ms. Holtzman emphasized that increasing public awareness of the 988 crisis line was instrumental in ensuring that anyone experiencing a mental health crisis could quickly access appropriate emergency support.

Chairman Garcia inquired whether data was available regarding the number of 988 calls originating from Miami-Dade County.

Ms. Holtzman advised that Jewish Community Services (JCS) managed the national suicide and crisis line for the region and would have access to that call data. She suggested that JCS could be invited to present this information to the Board at a future meeting.

V. NEW MEMBERS/PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS

Ms. Dominguez announced Ms. Miriam Stewart, Assistant Superintendent, would serve as the new representative for the Miami-Dade County Public Schools; while Mr. Christopher Wing would represent the Public Health Trust (PHT). She clarified that a vote was not required and reiterated the new members had requested to be excused from today's meeting.

VI. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

It was moved by Mr. Claudio Perez that the July 29, 2025 BHAB minutes be approved, as presented. The motion was seconded by Mr. Carlos Martinez and upon being put to a vote, passed by a vote of 19-0 (Ms. Miriam Stewart, Ms. Laura Naredo, Mr. Christopher Wing, and Dr. Joseph Poitier was excused).

VII. OLD BUSINESS/NEW BUSINESS

a. Motion to Vote for Vice Chair

Ms. Lourdes Dorado moved to appoint Mr. Claudio Perez as the BHAB Vice Chair. The motion was seconded by Mr. Alfredo Hernandez; and upon being put to a vote, passed 19-0 (Ms. Miriam Stewart, Ms. Laura Naredo, Mr. Christopher Wing, and Dr. Joseph Poitier were absent).

b. Creation of BHAB ByLaws

Ms. Dominguez advised that BHAB members had recommended the creation of bylaws based upon the ordinance established by the Board of County Commissioners (BCC). At Chairman Garcia's request, Ms. Dominguez read Article 10 (Article X) of the bylaws into the record, which outlined the Duties and Powers of BHAB.

Judge Sayfie raised a concern about the language in Article X "C", noting that it suggested the Board would be developing needs assessments for behavioral health services. She stated that this type of technical work should be done by mental health professionals and experts rather than the advisory board.

Chairman Garcia clarified that the Board would work collaboratively with community mental health providers to accomplish this task rather than attempting to do it independently.

Vice Chairman Perez proposed modifying the language to make the Board's role clearer, suggesting phrases like "help develop" and "help ensure" be inserted to reflect that the Board would be providing guidance rather than directly performing these functions.

Chairman Garcia indicated his objections to the suggested edits, explaining that the wording came directly from the BCC's ordinance and the Board would determine how to fulfill these duties through its direction and decision-making.

Chairman Garcia opposed these proposed changes, explaining that the wording was derived directly from the ordinance passed by the BCC and noted that BHAB would provide direction to accomplish various duties as outlined in the By-Laws.

Ms. Edith Wright suggested that the public should understand who actually served on the Board.

Following this request, Ms. Dominguez read the entire membership section of the bylaws into the record. She explained that the BHAB consists of 23 voting members representing various County departments, the judicial system, behavioral health providers, and individuals with lived experience. She also noted that an amendment had been added to include representation from the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

Discussion ensued among Ms. Holtzman, Ms. Acosta and Chairman Garcia about the two Board seats designated for individuals "diagnosed with or suffering from a behavioral health disorder." Ms. Holtzman sought clarification about who filled these positions, and Chairman Garcia confirmed they had members serving in those capacities.

Ms. Lourdes Dorado requested that the word "suffering" be replaced with "recovering" throughout the bylaws when referring to individuals with behavioral health conditions. She explained that "suffering" was not recovery-oriented language.

Chairman Garcia acknowledged that the Board needed to be mindful of terminology and that members came from different backgrounds with varying sensitivities to language. He supported making this change even though it differed from the County commission's original ordinance language.

Discussion ensued among Ms. Holtzman, Ms. Acosta and Chairman Garcia about the two Board seats designated for individuals "diagnosed with or suffering from a behavioral health disorder." Ms. Holtzman sought clarification about who filled these positions, and Chairman Garcia confirmed they had members serving in those capacities.

Ms. Lourdes Dorado moved to update the language in Article III, Nos. 17 and 18 to read "recovering" instead of "suffering." This motion was seconded by Mr. Alfredo Hernandez, and upon being put to a vote, passed 19-0 (Ms. Miriam Stewart, Ms. Laura Naredo, Mr. Christopher Wing, and Dr. Joseph Poitier were absent).

Ms. Michelle Lauren Fernandez moved to adopt the bylaws, as amended. The motion was seconded by Vice Chairman Perez and upon being put to a vote, passed 19-0 (Ms. Miriam Stewart, Ms. Laura Naredo, Mr. Christopher Wing, and Dr. Joseph Poitier was excused).

c. Approved Community-Based Organizations' Allocation

Chairman Garcia acknowledged that the County had recently completed its budget process and that funding levels for community-based organizations (CBO) had been determined and restored.

Ms. Dominguez noted that Board member Laura Naredo had requested this topic be added to the agenda for discussion but was unable to attend the meeting.

Chairman Garcia asked staff to include this item on the next meeting's agenda for fuller discussion.

Mr. Daniel Wall credited Chairman Garcia's leadership in getting the CBO funding restored and explained that organizations historically funded over multiple years would receive allocations at their previous year's levels. This included what he called the "legacy recurring list" as well as some newer continuing programs and community initiatives, including the behavioral health board itself. He noted that Chairman Garcia's motion at the BCC had been instrumental in restoring full funding. Mr. Wall also announced the

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

new competitive request for proposals (RFP) process for CBOs had been officially eliminated. He explained this decision was made due to budget constraints and the fact that these were non-recurring funds. He mentioned that Chairman Garcia and Commissioner McGhee were working on legislation to establish a trust fund for community-based organizations going forward. Mr. Wall indicated his office would provide a revised list of allocations to board staff and recalled a list of funded organizations, including NAMI, mental health centers, and numerous other service providers.

Ms. Holtzman clarified that NAMI had not been fully restored to its previous funding level.

Mr. Wall acknowledged this point, explaining that some agencies had multiple separate allocations in the past, and the Mayor's office had worked to restore the largest single allocation for each organization rather than all of their various historical funding streams.

d. BHAB's Marketing Campaign and Social Media

Chairman Garcia invited discussion about how the Board should focus its efforts moving forward. He noted that Board members came from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and he wanted to ensure they were strategic rather than trying to address every issue simultaneously. He specifically mentioned concerning statistics about male suicide rates and the need to break cycles of crisis for young adults.

Chairman Garcia suggested creating small working committees of three to four members each that could focus on specific issues, develop recommendations, and bring them back to the full Board for consideration. He emphasized the importance of the Board being proactive and noted that having a County Commissioner as chair gave the Board a direct connection to County decision-making.

Discussion ensued among Multiple Board members offered their perspectives on priority areas. There was extensive discussion about first responders, veterans' mental health needs, prevention efforts, and combating stigma. Members also discussed the importance of using social media strategically to reach the community and raise awareness. During the discussion, members raised the issue of homelessness and its connection to mental health challenges. It was suggested that rather than focusing on homelessness broadly, the committee should concentrate specifically on supportive housing, since the lack of appropriate housing options was one of the most significant barriers facing people in recovery.

Chairman Garcia agreed this was a more targeted and useful approach. He emphasized the importance of conducting a needs assessment and noted that Florida International University (FIU) had already completed a community needs assessment for the County and requested that Ms. Dominguez reach out to obtain this report. He suggested using the FIU assessment as a benchmark for the Board's planning efforts.

Ms. Dominguez agreed to contact FIU and potentially arrange for a presentation at the December meeting, though she noted she would need to review whether all factors in their assessment aligned with the Board's priorities.

It was noted that Thriving Minds was also in the process of completing a needs assessment.

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

Chairman Garcia emphasized the value of having these existing assessments to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure the board worked collaboratively rather than in conflicting directions.

Following the discussion, Ms. Dominguez requested clarification regarding the Board's intent to establish four (4) separate subcommittees focused on: (1) prevention, first responders, and stigma reduction; (2) social media strategy and public education; (3) supportive housing; and (4) veterans' services.

Mr. Martinez moved to create the four (4) subcommittees. Vice Chairman Perez seconded the motion; and upon being put to a vote, passed 19-0 (Ms. Miriam Stewart, Ms. Laura Naredo, Mr. Christopher Wing, and Dr. Joseph Poitier were excused).

Ms. Carolyn Acosta expressed her strong desire to serve on the first responder suicide prevention committee, revealing that her husband, who was a firefighter, had died by suicide in July 2024. She emphasized that she was aware of the critical need for better prevention efforts among first responders.

Chairman Garcia thanked her for her courage and willingness to advocate for others facing similar struggles.

e. Update on the Mental Health Facility

Ms. Cathy Burgos provided an update on the mental health facility project. She reported that the County had approved a merger between the CAHSD and the Juvenile Services Department (JSD) and as a licensed clinical social worker, she would oversee this newly combined department. Ms. Burgos explained that this restructured department would continue managing the mental health facility project while also working to better coordinate clinical services across the lifespan, from early Head Start programs through services for older adults and expressed appreciation for Chairman Garcia's continued advocacy for mental health services.

Chairman Garcia asked about the timeline for opening the facility.

Ms. Burgos responded that once the BCC approved the necessary item, they could have short-term and long-term crisis services operational within six (6) months. She noted that while some build-out work remained, specifically the kitchen and seventh floor, staff had already arranged for meal delivery services so the facility could begin operations while that construction continued.

Mr. Martinez raised serious concerns about the growing number of defendants found legally incompetent to stand trial who remained in the county jail because no state forensic hospital beds were available for them. He noted that Miami-Dade had approximately 50 such individuals and advocated for the State to fund placements at the Miami Center so these residents could receive appropriate treatment rather than languishing in jail. He expressed frustration that this problem had been discussed for over 20 years.

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

Ms. Burgos assured the Board that developing appropriate services would be a collaborative process involving all stakeholders at the table, just as the County had done with other innovative programs. She emphasized openness to creative solutions.

Ms. Dorado mentioned that the State had pilot programs for forensic diversion and offered to help facilitate conversations between the relevant parties.

Chairman Garcia asked Ms. Burgos about Miami-Dade County's recent release from a consent decree.

Ms. Burgos recommended that either Chief Reyes or Corrections Department Director Green present on this topic at a future meeting.

Chairman Garcia agreed and emphasized the importance of informing the community about the County's efforts that led to removal from the consent decree. He requested that the Director Green be invited to provide a detailed briefing at an upcoming Board meeting.

Vice Chairman Perez explained that the State forensic hospital system had a 400-person waiting list and that many individuals struggled to transition back to community settings after treatment. He suggested the Miami Center could potentially serve both forensic and community purposes, which might help reduce the State-level backlog.

Ms. Dorado provided additional technical details, explaining that the State had allocated funding for what's called "residential Level 1" services, the highest security level short of a locked facility, to support people in forensic diversion programs or those being discharged from state hospitals. However, no Level 1 facility currently existed in Miami-Dade, so those funds were going to Passageway, which operated at Level 2. She mentioned ongoing discussions about potentially establishing Level 1 capacity at the Miami Center.

Ms. Anunziato proposed that the Miami Center could serve as a transitional facility for individuals being discharged from state hospitals. She explained that many patients were clinically ready to return to the community but remained in State facilities because community mental health providers had lengthy waiting lists. She believed utilizing the Miami Center as an interim placement option could help reduce these system-wide bottlenecks and facilitate smoother transitions from institutional to community-based care.

Ms. Burgos clarified that the mental health facility already had an established model focusing on crisis intervention services, including both short-term and long-term care. However, she emphasized the department's willingness to consider innovative approaches and creative solutions proposed by board members and community stakeholders. She also acknowledged the strong support from BCC Chair Rodriguez and Commission in advancing mental health services throughout the County.

CLERK'S SUMMARY OF MINUTES
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (BHAB)
September 22, 2025

VIII. Announcements

Ms. Dominguez reminded everyone that September was National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. She announced that the Board's next meeting would take place on December 1, 2025 at 10:00 a.m. in the Commission Chambers.

Chairman Garcia informed the Board of recent conversations he had held with former Congressman Patrick Kennedy regarding federal initiatives to regionalize mental health service delivery through outcome-based funding models. He committed to presenting detailed information at the December meeting about potential federal funding opportunities. Chairman Garcia emphasized his commitment to transparency by sharing these preliminary discussions while clarifying that any decisions would require Board approval.

Chairman Garcia encouraged members to maintain active engagement between meetings and utilize available staff resources to advance their initiatives. He urged the Board to sustain momentum in its work rather than limiting progress to formal meeting times.

Adjournment

There being no further business to come before the BHAB, the meeting was adjourned at 11:37 am.