



## Older Adult Behavioral Health Fact Sheet March 2022

As we age, we enjoy an increase in protective factors, such as resilience and wisdom, suggesting the potential for lifelong positive mental health. However, many older adults need support to reaching this goal of wellbeing. The Legislature can promote and protect older adult behavioral health in the Commonwealth by expanding vital community-based supports.

### Older Adult Behavioral Health by the numbers

- As many as **1 in 3** MA older adults are diagnosed with a behavioral health or substance use condition and older adults are the **least likely of any age group to receive behavioral health treatment**.
- Untreated behavioral health conditions are associated with **devastating outcomes** including high rates of hospitalization/ED use and development of preventable disability.
- People with behavioral health conditions are **3x as likely to be admitted to a nursing home** and these admissions occur at a younger age.

### Older Adults, Behavioral Health and COVID 19

- Nearly **one in 10 nursing home residents in the US had died of COVID** as of March 2021. While residents of nursing homes and other long-term care settings account for 1% of the population, by March 2021 they accounted for 34% of COVID deaths. These percentages are even higher in Massachusetts.
- Both state and national data reflect **higher percentages of fatalities in nursing homes where the majority of residents are non-white**.
- Prior to the pandemic, a National Academies report on older adults concluded that **social isolation can hasten premature death** from all causes, with a mortality risk potentially on par or even greater than factors like smoking and obesity.
- Accessible, culturally responsive in-home supports are needed to combat loneliness and provide every opportunity for people to remain in the community or setting of their choice.

### Dignity Alliance's Behavioral Health Priorities

- Expansion of **Elder Mental Health Outreach Teams (EMHOTs)** community based behavioral health for older adults throughout the state to ensure all older adults have access to critical supports.
- **Guardianship reform** including less restrictive alternatives, such as supported decision making, public guardianship programs, and oversight to ensure that guardians for older adults with impaired decision-making comply with the Supreme Court's Olmstead decision, which requires the pursuit of **community options first**.
- Reduce overreliance on **psychotropic medication in nursing homes**, including antipsychotics which are associated with side effects and, for people with dementia, high mortality rates.
- **Increase social work staffing at nursing homes** to provide adequate support to residents and families and decrease staff turnover.