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California Health Care Foundation

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NEW POLL: CALIFORNIANS INCREASINGLY CONCERNED ABOUT ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND RISING COST OF CARE

While 90% of respondents rate mental health care access as a top priority, 55% say their community does not have enough mental health care providers

Just over half of Californians have skipped or postponed physical or mental health treatment due to the cost of care—with 42% of those saying it made their condition worse

SACRAMENTO — A poll released today by the California Health Care Foundation (CHCF) finds mental health care access remains a top priority for nine in 10 Californians, while the rising cost of physical and mental health care is causing increasing numbers of Californians to struggle to pay for prescription drugs, medical bills, and health care premiums. More than half of Californians also say they have postponed or skipped treatment due to the rising cost of care, and, for many, this missed treatment made their health condition worse.

The poll, [*Health Care Priorities and Experiences of California Residents*](#), was conducted by CHCF and SSRS, a national survey research firm, and offers detailed insight into Californians' views on a range of critical health issues, including health care affordability and access, perceptions on homelessness, the health care workforce, Medi-Cal, and the experiences of the uninsured. Results from the survey are also compared to a 2019 CHCF poll on the same topics to identify emerging trends.

Some of the key findings in this year's survey:

- For the second year in a row, California residents say making sure people with mental health problems can get treatment is their top health care priority. Nine in 10 (90%) said this was extremely or very important (52% said "extremely" important)—topping all other health issues presented.
- Just over half of Californians (51%) have skipped or postponed physical or mental health care due to cost — up from 44% last year. Of those who took this step, 42% said it made their condition worse.
- Compared to last year's survey, Californians are more worried about paying for unexpected medical bills (63% last year; 69% today), out-of-pocket health care costs (55% last year; 66% today), prescription drugs (42% last year; 50% today), and health insurance premiums (39% last year; 44% today).

"For too long, the health care system has treated mental health concerns as a second-tier issue," said CHCF President and CEO Sandra R. Hernández, MD. "For the second year in a row, the people of California are sending a clear message that this is the top health care issue they want addressed."

When compared to other issues facing the state, Californians rank health care affordability as their top priority among a range of public challenges presented in the poll—with 84% of respondents citing it as extremely or very important. Improving public education received the same response (84%), closely followed by addressing homelessness (83%), attracting and retaining businesses and jobs (78%), and making housing more affordable (76%). Support for making health care more affordable cut across party identification, race, and income lines.

"The cost of health care is clearly keeping Californians up at night, and those concerns appear to be getting worse," Hernández said. "California has made significant progress on coverage. We can do better on affordability too."

See all the poll findings on the [CHCF website](#). The poll was conducted with a representative statewide survey of California's residents between November 18 and December 30, 2019.

Other key findings include:

Mental health care:

- More than one in four Californians (27%) say that they or a family member received treatment for a mental health condition in the past 12 months; 7% say they or a family member received treatment for an alcohol or drug use problem.
- Among those with insurance who tried to make an appointment for mental health care in the past 12 months, almost half (48%) found it very or somewhat difficult to find a provider who took their insurance. Over half (52%) of those who tried to make an appointment (with or without insurance) believe they waited longer than was reasonable to get one.
- Nearly nine in 10 (89%) of respondents are in favor of increasing the number of mental health care providers in parts of the state where providers are in short supply. Additionally, 89% favor enforcing rules requiring health insurance companies to provide mental health care at the same level as physical health care.

Health care affordability:

- Nearly a quarter of residents (24%) report that they or someone in their family had problems paying or an inability to pay medical bills in the past 12 months.
- Almost one-third (32%) of those with incomes under 200% of the federal poverty level report having problems paying their medical bills compared to 19% of those with higher incomes.

Uninsured adults report trouble paying their medical bills (45%) at twice the rate of those with employer-sponsored health insurance (20%).

- More than eight in 10 (82%) respondents say it is important to lower the price of prescription drugs—up from 75% last year.
- Just over half of Californians (51%) report taking some sort of action related to delaying care due to the cost—up from 44% last year. Steps respondents have taken include skipping dental care (38%), postponing physical health care (25%), skipping a recommended test or treatment (21%), not filling a prescription (18%), postponing mental health care (16%), or cutting pills in half or skipping a dose of medicine (12%).
- Many Californians also reported going to great lengths to be able to pay their medical bills: Two-thirds (66%) have cut back on spending on basic household items like food and clothing. Almost half have used up their savings (49%), increased their credit card debt (49%), taken on extra work (46%), borrowed money from friends or family (42%), or taken out money from their long-term savings accounts such as savings for college or retirement (37%).

Health care workforce:

- More than a third of Californians believe there are not enough primary care providers (34%) and specialists (35%) in their local communities. Nearly half of residents in the Inland Empire (46%) and San Joaquin Valley (49%) believe the number of primary care providers is lacking.
- More than four in 10 (42%) Medi-Cal recipients report having to wait longer than reasonable to get an appointment, compared to 28% of those with employer-sponsored coverage.
- Facing lack of access to providers, more than eight in 10 Californians (83%) say making sure there are enough doctors, nurses, and other health care providers should be an important priority for the governor and legislature.

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