

# Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia

## Why We Exist, What We Built, and How Houston County Moves Forward

Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia (MHM) was not created in theory. It was created in response to data, lived system strain, and a documented failure of access.

In 2023, founder **Chrystal Wasden, LPC, CCMHC** authored the **Houston County Statement of Need for Behavioral Health**, drawing on interviews and data from the Juvenile Court, school system, hospitals, law enforcement, the Community Service Board (CSB), NAMI, and community providers. The findings were clear and urgent: Houston County's behavioral health needs had outpaced its capacity to respond, and the consequences were being absorbed by schools, jails, emergency rooms, and families rather than addressed upstream.

**Houston County Georgia Statement of Need for Behavioral Health.**

That statement of need became the blueprint for **Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia.**

### **The Foundational Reality: Mental Health Is Health**

Modern neuroscience confirms what Houston County systems were already experiencing daily:

- Chronic stress and trauma alter brain development, emotional regulation, and executive functioning
- Untreated mental illness increases risk for academic failure, justice involvement, physical health decline, and family instability
- You cannot punish, discipline, or crisis-respond your way out of a dysregulated nervous system

Mental health is not secondary to physical health—it is biologically and functionally inseparable from it. When mental health systems fail, every other public system pays the price.

**MHM exists to ensure Houston County responds to mental health needs with the same urgency, coordination, and evidence-based standards expected of physical healthcare.**

### **The 2023 Statement of Need: What Houston County Was Facing**

The Statement of Need documented systemic barriers that made clear why access to care was failing:

- Georgia ranked **48th** in access to mental health care
- Houston County (population ~164,883) relied on a CSB serving 11 counties with:
  - 8 licensed therapists
  - 2 psychiatrists
  - An 80% loss of licensed providers over two years
- One in five individuals with serious mental illness ended up in jail rather than treatment
- Two in five children struggled to access needed mental health care
- Houston County schools served 30,000+ students across 37 schools, with only three licensed mental health professionals dedicated largely to crisis response

The county lacked:

- Child and adolescent crisis services
- Partial hospitalization programs
- Adult residential mental health treatment
- Male residential substance-use treatment

Law enforcement and first responders were often the first to mental health crises—without a consistent Crisis Intervention Team and training (CIT).

These findings showed a system that was reactive instead of preventive, fragmented instead of coordinated, and stretched far beyond capacity.

### **The Hidden Driver: Workforce Shortages and the Missing Provider Pipeline**

While provider shortages were clearly identified, the Statement of Need also revealed a deeper structural barrier:

Houston County does not have sufficient healthcare training pipelines, residencies, or supervised practice infrastructure to attract, develop, and retain qualified behavioral health providers, psychologist, and psychiatrist.

This includes:

- Limited psychiatric residency or rotation opportunities tied to Houston County
- Underutilization of associate-level clinicians due to insurance and supervision barriers
- Few structured pathways for early-career clinicians to train, practice, and remain in the county

As a result:

- Providers are trained elsewhere and do not return
- Existing clinicians are overextended, increasing burnout and turnover
- Hospitals, CSB, public health, schools, and private practice compete for the same small pool of professionals
- Access to care remains limited even when funding or referrals exist

This led to a critical conclusion embedded in the Statement of Need:

**Access to care cannot be expanded without intentionally expanding and sustaining a qualified workforce.**

Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia was created not to replace providers—but to help build the system conditions that allow providers to exist, stay, and practice effectively.

### **Mission Rooted in Data, Science, and Systems**

#### **Mission Statement**

Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia advocates for individuals suffering from mental illness, reduces stigma, improves access to care, and educates the community—including first responders—so families can receive compassionate, effective support when they need it most.

#### **Vision**

A Middle Georgia where mental health is prioritized, understood, and treated as essential to overall health.

MHM's mission is operational, not aspirational. It exists to translate what the data and neuroscience demand into functioning systems.

### **From Need to Action: Building Systems That Work**

#### **Truancy to Triumph (TFT): Designed to Intervene Earlier**

One of the clearest failures identified in the Statement of Need was how untreated mental health needs surfaced as truancy, pushing youth toward juvenile court rather than treatment.

Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia developed the **Truancy to Triumph (TFT)** program and partnered with the Houston County Juvenile Court and school system to:

- Design a trauma-informed, pre-court diversion model
- Align with Georgia CHINS law while prioritizing prevention
- Support the Juvenile Court in securing grant funding
- Establish clear accountability, data, and fidelity standards

TFT now operates as a front-end intervention, addressing anxiety, trauma, family stress, access barriers, and learning challenges before formal court escalation occurs.

This model reflects neuroscience and systems logic: **early stabilization prevents downstream system overload.**

## **Scaling the System: SIMS and Crisis Intervention**

### **Sequential Intercept Mapping Strategy (SIMS)**

In 2026, MHM will participate in the **Sequential Intercept Mapping Strategy (SIMS)** with the Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

SIMS maps how individuals with mental health needs move through schools, law enforcement, courts, hospitals, and community systems—identifying gaps and missed opportunities for intervention.

SIMS represents the bridge between identified need and structural redesign.

### **Building a Houston County Crisis Intervention Team (CIT)**

A central outcome of SIMS will be development of a countywide **Crisis Intervention Team (CIT)** framework.

For MHM and its board, CIT means:

- A coordinated response network, not a single agency
- Crisis responses grounded in trauma-informed care and neuroscience
- Reduced unnecessary arrests, ER boarding, and court involvement
- Increased safety for individuals, families, and first responders
- A more sustainable workforce supported rather than burned out

MHM's role is to convene, educate, align, and sustain this network so crisis response reflects modern science rather than outdated enforcement-only models.

## **Mission in Motion: Deliverables That Matter**

### **Improve Access to Care**

- Truancy to Triumph diversion program
- Justice-involved education and referrals
- Provider directory development

### **Reduce Stigma and Fear**

- Plain-language education on CHINS and court processes
- Trauma-informed family engagement
- Mental Health First Aid and Youth MHFA trainings

### Equip Systems and Workforce


- Cross-training for schools, courts, and first responders
- SIMS participation and system mapping
- CIT framework development
- Advocacy for workforce and provider-pipeline solutions

### Build Sustainable Infrastructure

- Data-informed prevention models
- Cross-system coordination
- Strategic growth beyond single-grant solutions

### Digital Presence and Growth

Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia is currently rebuilding its website, which will relaunch under its permanent domain:

 [www.mhmattersga.org](http://www.mhmattersga.org)

This platform will reflect MHM's systems-level focus, community education, and expanding role in Houston County and Middle Georgia.

Currently you can find us at: [www.mhmattersinmiddlega.org](http://www.mhmattersinmiddlega.org)

### Why Board Leadership Matters Now

Mental Health Matters of Middle Georgia exists because Houston County cannot afford to treat mental health as secondary any longer.

The data is clear.

The science is clear.

The systems are ready.

What determines success is **leadership**.

MHM is seeking board members who:

- Believe mental health is equal to physical health
- Understand that systems—not just services—change outcomes
- Are willing to serve actively
- Can give and/or help generate resources
- Want to leave Houston County stronger than they found it