

Access to Care: Meeting People Where They Are

Bringing Care Closer to Home

Part 1 of 2 - September 2026

Executive Summary

Access to behavioral health care begins long before someone walks through the doors of a treatment program.

For some, seeking help means finding the courage to walk into RBHA and ask for services. For others, it means connecting with a clinician at their child's school, meeting an RBHA staff member at a neighborhood resource center, or calling Developmental Services because they do not know where else to begin.

The path looks different for everyone.

That is why RBHA's approach to access extends beyond traditional office-based care. Through same-day assessment, developmental services intake, school-based services, neighborhood resource centers, community partnerships, and outreach, RBHA is working to make behavioral health and developmental services easier to find, easier to reach, and easier to navigate.

Access is more than having services available. It is making sure people can connect with care when and where they are ready to seek it.

Why Access Matters

The sooner individuals and families can connect with services, the greater the opportunity to address concerns early, strengthen coping skills, improve functioning, and prevent needs from escalating into crisis.

But accessing care is not always simple.

Transportation. Work schedules. Childcare. Housing instability. Limited phone access. Financial strain. Stigma. Uncertainty about where to begin. Previous negative experiences with systems.

Any one of these barriers can make the difference between receiving care today and postponing it indefinitely.

For someone already struggling with depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use, developmental concerns, or overwhelming life circumstances, navigating another complicated system can feel like one more obstacle.

RBHA is working to change that.

FRONTLINE VOICE

“Once someone makes that decision, they are often eager to get the ball rolling on treatment.”

Starting When Someone Is Ready

Rapid Access

For youth and adults seeking mental health or substance use services, Rapid Access provides an entry point to begin the assessment process through scheduled and walk-in access.

Staff describe people arriving with a wide range of needs - depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use, suicidal thoughts, worsening symptoms, or simply the realization that they need help and do not know where else to turn.

For many, getting through the door is in itself an important step.

A Rapid Access clinician explained that making the decision to seek treatment can take tremendous courage. When someone finally decides, “I’m ready,” a long delay can create another opportunity for symptoms to worsen, substance use to continue, or the person to reconsider seeking help altogether.

Same-day access does not mean every service begins immediately. It means the process can begin when the individual is ready - and that they do not have to figure out the next steps alone.

In FY26, Rapid Access Clinicians completed:

3,357 assessments

246 of those assessments were conducted at RPS school sites

Helping Families Navigate a Complex System

Developmental Services

Access looks different for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.

Families may contact RBHA seeking placement on Virginia's Developmental Disability Waiver Waitlist, case management, information about available resources, or simply guidance about what services their child or family member may qualify for.

In FY26, Developmental Services completed:

92 child intake assessments

73 children opened for services

43 adult ID/DD intake assessments

Through Part C Early Intervention:

433 initial assessments/opened transfer cases

23 follow-up assessments (most of these were assessments for autism)

Early identification can have lasting impact. Developmental Services staff report that identifying needs earlier can help families address behavioral challenges, determine appropriate supports, and coordinate accommodations through schools and other systems.

RBHA also offers an important resource within its developmental services continuum: in-house clinical psychologists who can perform psychological evaluations that might otherwise require families to navigate outside providers and potentially lengthy waits.

But perhaps one of the most important parts of access is helping families understand a complicated system.

The goal is not simply to complete an intake.

The goal is to ensure families know they are not navigating things alone.

Bringing Care Into the Community

Sometimes the best way to improve access is not to ask people to come to services.

It is to bring services to them.

RBHA staff work within community-based locations, including neighborhood resource centers and public housing communities, where residents already live, gather, and access other services.

These settings can remove practical barriers such as transportation while addressing something less tangible but equally important: trust.

Consistent presence allows relationships to develop over time. Residents can meet behavioral health professionals in familiar environments, ask questions, learn about available resources, and begin conversations without the formality - or perceived stigma - of entering a traditional behavioral health setting.

Community-based staff report that residents frequently bring concerns related to anxiety, depression, trauma, grief and loss, substance use, social isolation, family stress, housing instability, and the cumulative impact of community violence and adversity.

In these settings, access may begin with a referral.

But sometimes it begins with a conversation.

Meeting people where they are can turn a familiar community space into a doorway to behavioral health care.

Reaching Children Where They Spend Their Day

School-Based Behavioral Health Services

For children and families, schools can provide another important entry point to care.

Transportation, caregivers' work schedules, limited information about behavioral health resources, unreliable phone access, and competing family responsibilities can all make attending traditional outpatient appointments difficult.

Providing services within schools helps remove some of those barriers while allowing clinicians to build consistent relationships with students, educators, and families.

Staff report that early behavioral health support can help students develop emotional regulation and coping skills that extend well beyond the classroom. They have seen improvements in behavior, attendance, communication, self-confidence, relationships, and students' ability to identify and express what they are experiencing.

School-based services also allow behavioral health support to become part of a student's existing environment rather than one more place a family has to find a way to reach.

A Story of Access

One RBHA clinician works with a student whose family had struggled to access behavioral health care outside of school.

The student's mother did not have reliable transportation, and traveling downtown for weekly appointments created a significant barrier. The need was there. The desire for help was there.

Access was the missing piece.

By providing services at the child's school, the clinician could meet consistently with the student during the school day - without requiring the mother to arrange transportation or leave everything else behind each week to get her child to an appointment.

And because the clinician was already present in the school, the connection extended beyond the student.

When the mother was in the building, staff were also able to talk with her about services available for her own needs.

One access point opened another.

What began as bringing behavioral health care closer to one child became an opportunity to support an entire family.

Accessibility Builds Opportunity

There is no single doorway into behavioral health or developmental services.

For one person, access may mean walking into Rapid Access on the day they finally decide they are ready for help.

For a family, it may mean speaking with a Developmental Services Intake Coordinator who helps make an unfamiliar system understandable.

For a community resident, it may begin with a conversation at a neighborhood resource center.

For a child, it may happen during the school day.

Different people need different pathways.

RBHA's commitment is to continue creating those pathways: bringing services closer to the people who need them and reducing the barriers that too often stand between an individual and care.

*Behavioral health care should not begin only at the point of crisis.
Expanding access means creating opportunities for individuals and families to connect with support earlier, closer to home, and in ways that meet their needs.*

Looking Ahead

Early access can prevent needs from escalating, but behavioral health crises can still happen.

When someone needs help immediately, access takes on a different meaning.

In the next report, we will explore Richmond's behavioral health crisis continuum - and how multiple pathways to immediate assessment, intervention, stabilization, and treatment help ensure that when a crisis occurs, there is no wrong door for accessing care.