



Guide to Identifying and Selecting High Quality Agencies To Provide Educationally Related Mental Health Services

Recent state budget action abolished AB 3632 and transferred responsibility to schools for providing educationally related mental health services. This sudden change has placed SELPA directors and special education directors in a new and unfamiliar position of selecting and contracting with community-based organizations to provide mental health and related services to students with mental health needs.

As a SELPA director, or director of special education for a district or charter school, you are attempting to identify and utilize the programs and services of provider organizations that can assure safety, achieve the best outcomes, provide the highest quality services and operate in a way that is ethical, transparent and accountable.

With over 40 years of history representing accredited, private non-profit organizations providing special education, mental health and residential services to vulnerable children and youth, the California Alliance is uniquely able to point to quality indicators that may assist you in identifying agencies, programs and services that will meet your needs and the needs of your students.

This document will provide specific guidance on criteria you may wish to use in identifying high quality providers of educationally related mental health services.

- **Are the agency and its programs accredited?**

Accreditation provides public notification that an agency or program meets standards of quality and ethics set forth by an accrediting body, and reflects the fact that in achieving that recognition, the agency has undergone rigorous review by external evaluators.

The standards met by accredited agencies are higher and more rigorous than the law requires. Accredited agencies undergo an examination that includes their finances, operations, administration, programs, and services, and that requires total transparency.

Accepted national accrediting bodies include the Council on Accreditation (COA), the Joint Commission, and the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). The California Alliance accredits only organizations within the state serving vulnerable children and families, and is the only statewide organization to do so.

All California Alliance member agencies are required to be accredited either by the Alliance or by one of the national bodies as a condition of membership. Some Alliance member agencies with nonpublic schools (NPS) are also accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

- **Does the agency have clearly defined mission and values? Are the mission and values in alignment with what you are trying to provide and achieve for the students for whom you are responsible?**

All reputable education and mental health agencies have current mission and values statements they use to guide the services the organization provides and the populations it serves. Foremost in the mission and values should be an agency's dedication to the children, youth and families it serves. An agency's mission statements and values should complement those of your organization, and should be visible and utilized daily to guide the agency's operations.

- **Does the agency have clear means it utilizes to define, deliver and measure the results it is trying to achieve?**

Effective agencies have means by which they define the results they are trying to achieve with the children and youth they serve, provide services that produce those results, then measure the results to assure they are achieving their intended outcomes and to feedback information into their programs so they can make continuous improvement.

This can take a number of forms, usually in combination:

- A system of **outcome monitoring and evaluation** for each child and for each of its services and programs;
 - A system of **ongoing quality improvement** by which the agency continuously examines its processes and results then uses that information to improve its performance, and guide its professional development plans for staff and individualized plans for students;
 - Use of **evidence-based practices** (EBP), that is, mental health therapies and practices that have been empirically tested and found to be effective in treating defined populations for specified problems or conditions.
 - Participation in a **benchmarking** process in which agencies compare the performance of their programs and services to like organizations in the state and across the nation. Benchmarking helps organizations improve their financial, operational, and practice performance by identifying best practices.
- **Is the agency able and willing to share with you its internal financial information that demonstrates how much money is spent for what activities?**

Reliable agencies have the capability of sharing financial information with anyone who requests it. They can show you how much revenue they receive for the services they provide, where it comes from and how much is spent on administration and service elements.

- **Does the agency understand what its role is in providing educationally related mental health services?**

An agency that will be a good partner with you will be able to articulate that its job is to provide intervention services geared to supporting students with mental health needs in the least restrictive educational setting possible, or to help students move from more restrictive to less restrictive settings as quickly as possible.

The agency will understand that each student's Individual Educational Plan (IEP) sets out the goals and objectives the IEP team hopes the student will achieve and specifies the services and support to be provided the student in order to achieve his or her goals, continue to progress behaviorally and academically, and require progressively less intensive interventions.

- **Has the agency asked you what you want and need?**

Responsive agencies will want to know the kinds of programs and services that you require in order to meet the needs of the students you serve – and they will respond to those needs. They will engage you in a conversation in which they add their mental health services expertise to your special education expertise in order to develop programs and services with the greatest likelihood of success.

The California Alliance has a history of representing the best providers of child and family services in the state, including those offering mental health and residential services. A roster of member agencies and links to their websites is available on our website at www.cacfs.org, under Member Directory and Links.

If you have any questions about the California Alliance, its membership or accrediting function, please contact us at 916/449-2273, visit our website, or visit us on Facebook.

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