

California is investing \$500M in therapy apps for youth: Advocates fear it won't pay off

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With little pomp, California launched two apps at the start of the year offering free behavioral health services to youths to help them cope with everything from living with anxiety to body acceptance.

Through their phones, [young people](#) and some caregivers can meet BrightLife Kids and Soluna coaches, some who specialize in [peer support](#) or substance use disorders, for roughly 30-minute virtual counseling sessions that are best suited to those with more mild needs, typically those without a clinical diagnosis. The apps also feature self-directed activities, such as white noise sessions, guided breathing, and videos of ocean waves to help users relax.

"We believe they're going to have not just great impact, but wide impact across California, especially in places where maybe it's not so easy to find an in-person behavioral health visit or the kind of coaching and supports that parents and young people need," said Gov. Gavin Newsom's health secretary, Mark Ghaly, during the Jan. 16 announcement.

The apps represent one of the Democratic governor's major forays into health technology and come with four-year contracts valued at \$498 million. California is believed to be the first state to offer a [mental health](#) app with free coaching to all young residents, according to the Department of Health Care Services, which operates the program.

However, the rollout has been slow. Only about 15,000 of the state's 12.6 million children and young adults have signed up for the apps, school counselors say they've never heard of them, and one of the companies isn't making its app available on Android phones until summer.

Advocates for youth question the wisdom of investing taxpayer dollars in two private companies. Social workers are concerned the companies' coaches won't properly identify youths who need referrals for clinical care. And the spending is drawing lawmaker scrutiny amid a state deficit pegged at as much as \$73 billion.

An app for that

Newsom's administration says the apps fill a need for young Californians and their families to access professional telehealth for free, in multiple languages, and outside of standard 9-to-5 hours. It's part of Newsom's sweeping \$4.7 billion master plan for kids' mental health, which was introduced in 2022 to increase access to mental health and substance use support services. In addition to launching virtual tools such as the teletherapy apps, the initiative is working to expand workforce capacity, especially in underserved areas.

"The reality is that we are rarely 6 feet away from our devices," said Sohil Sud, director of Newsom's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative. "The question is how we can leverage technology as a resource for all California youth and families, not in place of, but in addition to, other behavioral health services that are being developed and expanded."

The virtual platforms come amid rising depression and suicide rates among youth and a shortage of mental health providers. Nearly half of California youths from the ages of 12 to 17 report having recently struggled with mental health issues, with nearly a third experiencing serious psychological distress, according to a 2021 study by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. These rates are even higher for multiracial youths and those from low-income families.

But those supporting youth mental health at the local level question whether the apps will move the needle on climbing depression and suicide rates.

"It's fair to applaud the state of California for aggressively seeking new tools," said Alex Briscoe of California Children's Trust, a statewide initiative that, along with more than 100 local partners, works to improve the social and emotional health of children. "We just don't see it as fundamental. And we don't believe the youth mental health crisis will be solved by technology projects built by a professional class who don't

share the lived experience of marginalized communities."

The apps, BrightLife Kids and Soluna, are operated by two companies: Brightline, a five-year-old venture capital-backed startup; and Kooth, a London-based publicly traded company that has experience in the U.K. and has also signed on some schools in Kentucky and Pennsylvania and a health plan in Illinois. In the first five months of Kooth's Pennsylvania pilot, 6% of students who had access to the app signed up.

Brightline and Kooth represent a growing number of health tech firms seeking to profit in this space. They beat out dozens of other bidders including international consulting companies and other youth telehealth platforms that had already snapped up contracts in California.

Although the service is intended to be free with no insurance requirement, Brightline's app, BrightLife Kids, is folded into and only accessible through the company's main app, which asks for insurance information and directs users to paid licensed counseling options alongside the free coaching. After KFF Health News questioned why the free coaching was advertised below paid options, Brightline reordered the page so that, even if a child has high-acuity needs, free coaching shows up first.

The apps take an expansive view of behavioral health, making the tools available to all California youth under age 26 as well as caregivers of babies, toddlers, and children 12 and under. When KFF Health News asked to speak with an app user, Brightline connected a reporter with a mother whose 3-year-old daughter was learning to sleep on her own.

Despite being months into the launch and having millions in marketing funds, the companies don't have a definitive rollout timeline. Brightline said it hopes to have deployed teams across the state to present the tools in person by midyear. Kooth said developing a strategy to hit every

school would be "the main focus for this calendar year."

"It's a big state—58 counties," Bob McCullough of Kooth said. "It'll take us a while to get to all of them."

So far BrightLife Kids is available only on Apple phones. Brightline said it's aiming to launch the Android version over the summer.

"Nobody's really done anything like this at this magnitude, I think, in the U.S. before," said Naomi Allen, a co-founder and the CEO of Brightline. "We're very much in the early innings. We're already learning a lot."

The contracts, obtained by KFF Health News through a records request, show the companies operating the two apps could earn as much as \$498 million through the contract term, which ends in June 2027, months after Newsom is set to leave office. And the state is spending hundreds of millions more on Newsom's virtual behavioral health strategy. The state said it aims to make the apps available long-term, depending on usage.

The state said 15,000 people signed up in the first three months. When KFF Health News asked how many of those users actively engaged with the app, it declined to say, noting that data would be released this summer.

KFF Health News reached out to nearly a dozen California mental health professionals and youths. None of them were aware of the apps.

"I'm not hearing anything," said Loretta Whitson, executive director of the California Association of School Counselors. "It's like crickets."

Whitson said she doesn't think the apps are on "anyone's" radar in schools, and she doesn't know of any schools that are actively advertising them. Brightline will be presenting its tool to the counselor association in

May, but Whitson said the company didn't reach out to plan the meeting; she did.

Concern over referrals

Whitson isn't comfortable promoting the apps just yet. Although both companies said they have a clinical team on staff to assist, Whitson said she's concerned that the coaches, who aren't all licensed therapists, won't have the training to detect when users need more help and refer them to clinical care.

This sentiment was echoed by other school-based [social workers](#), who also noted the apps' duplicative nature—in some counties, like Los Angeles, youths can access free virtual counseling sessions through Hazel Health, a for-profit company. Nonprofits, too, have entered this space. For example, Teen Line, a peer-to-peer hotline operated by Southern California-based Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services, is free nationwide.

While the state is also funneling money to the schools as part of Newsom's master plan, students and school-based mental health professionals voiced confusion at the large app investment when, in many school districts, few in-person counseling roles exist, and in some cases are dwindling.

Kelly Merchant, a student at College of the Desert in Palm Desert, noted that it can be hard to access in-person therapy at her school. She believes the community college, which has about 15,000 students, has only one full-time counselor and one part-time bilingual counselor. She and several students interviewed by KFF Health News said they appreciated having engaging content on their phone and the ability to speak to a coach, but all said they'd prefer in-person therapy.

"There are a lot of people who are seeking therapy, and people close to me that I know. But their insurances are taking forever, and they're on the waitlist," Merchant said. "And, like, you're seeing all these people struggle."

Fiscal conservatives question whether the money could be spent more effectively, like to bolster county efforts and existing youth behavioral health programs.

Republican state Sen. Roger Niello, vice chair of the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee, noted that California is forecast to face deficits for the next three years, and taxpayer watchdogs worry the apps might cost even more in the long run.

"What starts as a small financial commitment can become uncontrollable expenses down the road," said Susan Shelley of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association.

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