

# Kalen Jackson: How do we fix Indiana's behavioral health system?

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**KALEN JACKSON**  
VIEWPOINT

A little more than two years ago, our family launched Kicking The Stigma, a local and national effort to raise awareness about mental health and remove the stigma associated with mental illnesses. Since then, we have launched a national awareness campaign, created a grant program to help bolster organizations engaged in this important work and highlighted mental health at Colts games in 2021 and 2022. Since late 2020, Kicking The Stigma has committed more than \$18 million to help address the mental health crisis in Indiana and beyond.

The topic of mental health is personal to us because our family has been impacted by this issue, both publicly and privately. But once we began immersing ourselves in this topic, we quickly learned just how devastating the realities of the mental and behavioral health system were in Indiana and across the country. Before the pandemic, the problem had already reached crisis proportions for thousands of

Hoosiers. Post-pandemic, these issues have been exacerbated in ways we all still might not understand.

The truth is, Indiana's mental health care system was created in a bygone era, and despite many efforts over many years, it is still problematic today. As a result, Hoosiers seeking treatment, as well as those trying to provide care, are hindered by antiquated, broken infrastructure. The results show themselves through alarming statistics in our high rates of suicide, substance abuse and other key indicators.

The anecdotal evidence is convincing as well. Since our first public service announcement ran in 2020, we have received letters, emails and calls from people around the world sharing their own heartbreaking stories and others simply looking for help. When you have people calling the front desk of a football team desperately seeking treatment or guidance, it's clear there is a problem.

As overwhelming as it can be, I have hope for Indiana because more people are witnessing the suffering around them and want to be a part of the solution. There is a critical mass of activity and attention, both locally and nationally, making this the perfect moment to tackle this crisis and make real, impactful change.

The Colts have been pleased to be involved with the Indiana Mental Health Roundtable, led by Lt. Gov. Suzanne Crouch, which is bringing together experts and stakeholders to propose systematic steps to better deal with mental health across our state.

Also, the Indiana Behavioral Health Commission last September released a blueprint for an innovative, patient-driven mental health system with a sustainable infrastructure, investments in workforce development for this specialized field and other measures to enhance the overall well-being of all Hoosiers.

One recommendation is to build a comprehensive crisis response system, including "988" call centers, mobile crisis teams to respond to

emergency situations and crisis stabilization units to provide safe locations to get help. The plan could be funded by implementing a \$1 surcharge for 988, which is almost identical to the surcharge already in place to fund 911 systems across the country.

Another recommendation is to invest in the expansion of and transition to certified community behavioral health clinics in Indiana. These clinics provide a comprehensive range of mental health and substance use services at the community level. This model has demonstrated great progress, and three federal administrations and a bipartisan consensus in Washington, D.C., have supported expansion over the last decade.

These are only two of the commission's many recommendations, so I hope Hoosiers will look at these ideas and support the necessary changes to help children, families and communities struggling with this issue. People's lives depend on it.

For some, it might seem that discussing mental health is a long way from the football field. But when an issue hurts so many of our friends and neighbors, our economy and the fabric of our communities, it's incumbent upon all of us to act and speak out. We hope all Hoosiers can join us in these efforts, as this is a challenge that will take all of us. •

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Jackson is vice chair and co-owner of the  Indianapolis Colts.

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