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Pediatric Behavioral Health Fundraising

BY KEVIN WESLEY

In March 2022, former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer and his wife, Connie, announced an extraordinary \$425 million gift to the University of Oregon to address pediatric behavioral health.

It is the largest, but only one of a growing number of significant major gifts recently made in an effort to tackle a growing crisis in pediatric and adolescent behavioral health.

It was once taboo, a subject rarely discussed by gift officers and donors, but today behavioral health has become a critical focus of health systems.

As the prevalence of depression, anxiety, substance use and other behavioral health issues grows, the demand is overwhelming emergency rooms and practitioners. The need for services is unprecedented, with reports of children waiting for days and weeks for available beds in treatment facilities.

Hospitals across the country are responding. The extraordinary demand has prompted rapid expansion in beds for inpatient treatment, recruitment of practitioners, and development of dedicated pediatric behavioral health space in emergency rooms that keeps patients and staff safe while in crisis.

Those projects are expensive and often need philanthropic support.

The crisis has motivated hospitals to seek donors for philanthropic support of these critical needs ... and donors are paying close attention.

Ballmer Gift to Address Behavioral Health in Multiple Ways

The Ballmer gift establishes the Ballmer Institute for Children’s Behavioral Health. It’s designed to provide better access to behavioral health promotion, prevention and care. The institute take a multi-pronged approach, including:



Creating a new medical practitioner – the child behavioral health specialist



Training undergraduate students to provide interventions that promote well-being and prevent the development and worsening of mental health issues in children and adolescents



Establishing a three-credit micro-credential to train educators and other youth-serving professionals with practices that can be applied in classrooms and other spaces



Researching new approaches and solutions to behavioral health via interventions, services and technologies

The Ballmer gift is just one of several 8- and 9-figure commitments recently to pediatric behavioral health. Others include a \$100 million gift from an anonymous donor in 2018 to Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health to define the causes of mental health and develop cures.

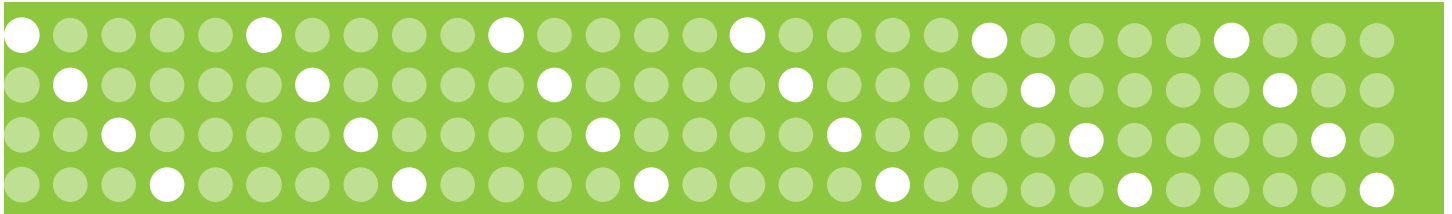
A \$50 million gift from businessman Garry Hurvitz to the Hospital for Sick Children, also in Toronto, takes a multi-phased approach to addressing pediatric behavioral health. The 2021 gift established the Garry Hurvitz Centre for Brain & Mental Health and the Garry Hurvitz Centre for Community Mental Health.

The Hurvitz donation will be used to:

- Recruit research chairs in neurology and neurosurgery.
- Develop internships in brain health and mental health research.
- Create an innovation fund to be used for research.
- Re-imagine integrated care for children with complex physical and behavioral health conditions.
- Provide innovative treatments for children, youth and families, with an emphasis on siblings who are often affected by the stress and complexity of behavioral health issues.

The Children's Behavioral Health Crisis by the Numbers

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [14.9 percent of children in the United States were treated for behavioral health conditions](#) in 2021. In any given year, the CDC estimates that [1 in 5 children experience a mental health disorder](#).



The CDC insights, gleaned from data from the 2021 National Health Interview Survey, includes other important statistics, including:

- Adolescents aged 12-17 received the most treatment
- 8.2 percent had taken medications, with boys more likely than girls to take medications for behavioral health conditions
- 11.5 percent received counseling or therapy from a counselor
- White children (18.3 percent) were most likely to receive treatment, compared to Black (12.5 percent), Hispanic (10.3 percent) and Asian (4.4 percent) children
- 19.1 percent of children in non-metro areas received treatment compared to large metro areas (14 percent) and medium or small metro areas (14.9 percent).

How significant is pediatric mental health to professionals? Consider that the Emergency Care Research Institute (ECRI), a leading healthcare safety organization, called it [the top patient safety concern for 2023](#). The ECRI cited a JAMA Pediatrics study showing that [rates of pediatric depression and anxiety doubled during the first year of the pandemic](#).

The demand is critical and outstripping supply. Waiting lists for therapists are extensive, with children languishing without psychiatric or psychological outpatient support for months. JAMA Pediatrics noted that pediatric mental health visits to [emergency rooms grew by 8 percent annually between 2015 and 2022](#), with 13 percent of patients revisiting within 6 months.

The Role of Philanthropy in the Behavioral Health Crisis

There are important shifts in how people perceive behavioral health that are allowing development officers and donors to have more honest, productive conversations with donors.

First is the shift in the general recognition of behavioral health as a health issue. A 2019 Harris poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association found that [87 percent of American adults believed that mental illness was nothing to be ashamed of](#). The ongoing normalization of mental illness means more people are willing to discuss the struggles they or loved ones have with behavioral health.

That sincerity leads to donors' inclination to talk, without shame, about behavioral health. Hurvitz, the \$50 million donor, openly discusses his own experience with depression and anxiety, and the early intervention that helped him. In a press release about the gift, he noted that his act was in part ["because I want to make sure kids have a better experience than I did. I want them to know they're not alone."](#)

Prominent philanthropists contributing to the cause is also a likely catalyst for other gifts. In addition to the Ballmer gift, other notable donors making recent gifts to pediatric behavioral health include:

- MacKenzie Scott, whose 2022 gift of \$30 million to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is helping in part to expand peer-led education programs
- John and Lisa Stone Pritzker, whose \$60 million gift in 2021 to the University of California San Francisco supports a new 150,000-square-foot building for psychiatric and behavioral sciences. The building is named for John's sister, Nancy Friend Pritzker, who died by suicide in 1972 at 24
- The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust's 2020 \$13 million grant to Avera to expand a Sioux Falls behavioral health center

Donors are continuing to respond. According to the Chronicle of Philanthropy, donors gave more to mental health in 2021 than in any other year in the past decade. The Chronicle noted that [15 donors gave 16 gifts of \\$1 million or more totaling almost \\$767 million](#).

How to Talk with Donors about Pediatric Behavioral Health

Here are some tips for fundraisers on how to talk about behavioral health with donors:

Get Comfortable

Some fundraisers may be unfamiliar with or uneasy talking about the issues related to pediatric behavioral health. It's wise to work closely with fundraising staffs to give them the skills and practice talking about these matters.

Provide Institutional Context

Organizations need to give donors perspective. Understanding the services provided, where gaps exist and the scale of demand are critical statistics to share. They can shape the narrative and address the critical need for support.

Show Compassion

When donors speak about the impact of behavioral health on themselves or loved ones, be sure to address the issue sensitively. If they have lost someone to suicide, for example, the conversations may be particularly painful. However, by focusing on the opportunity to help others and make a difference, fundraisers can help donors move forward.

Be Authentic

If you have experience with behavioral health yourself or in your family, you may want to share that information with a donor. This approach depends on your own comfort, the stage of the journey you're on, and the relationship with a donor. It may not be appropriate in all cases.

Research Similar Gifts

Especially with potentially large gifts, it's important to provide donors with perspective. Researching and sharing the impact of similar gifts helps donors to see how a same-sized gift could transform your institution.

Practice Self-Care

Behavioral health conversations can be very emotional.

Recent Major Gifts to Pediatric Behavioral Health, 2018-Present

GIFT AMOUNT (in millions)	DONOR	INSTITUTION	DATE	PURPOSE
\$425	Steve and Connie Ballmer	University of Oregon	March 2022	Training, research institute
\$105.80	Roberta "Bertie" Bialak Elliott	Montage Health Foundation	January 2018	Behavioral health facility, early intervention programs
\$100	Anonymous	Centre for Addiction and Mental Health	January 2018	Identify causes and cures for mental illness
\$60	John Pritzker and Lisa Stone Pritzker	University of California San Francisco	May 2021	Academic, research and treatment facility
\$50	Garry Hurvitz	Hospital for Sick Children	September 2021	Research, treatment, staff, new treatment models
\$30	MacKenzie Scott	National Alliance on Mental Illness	September 2022	Peer-led education programs, expanded services
\$30	Marlene Brandt	Rutgers University	January 2022	Comprehensive mental health care for young people
\$25	Anonymous	Children's Hospital Los Angeles	January 2021	Expanded programming and access
\$20	Maureen and Jim Hackett	Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute	January 2018	Behavioral health facility
\$20	Yabuki Family Foundation	Children's Wisconsin	January 2022	Therapists for expanded delivery of behavioral health services at primary care, urgent care locations
\$15	Amanda Precourt	Vail Health Foundation	December 2019	Programming and suicide prevention
\$15	Hermann Family	St. Louis Children's Hospital, Washington University School of Medicine	February 2022	New care model for pediatric behavioral health
\$13	Leona and Harry Helmsley Charitable Trust	Avera Health	August 2021	Expand behavioral health facility
\$10	Ron Rosner	Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital	March 2022	Outpatient services, including teen drug use education
\$10	Brian and Martha Cornell	Sarasota Memorial	October 2021	Behavioral health facility
\$10	Nationwide Foundation	Nationwide Children's Hospital	August 2022	Research into pediatric behavioral health