

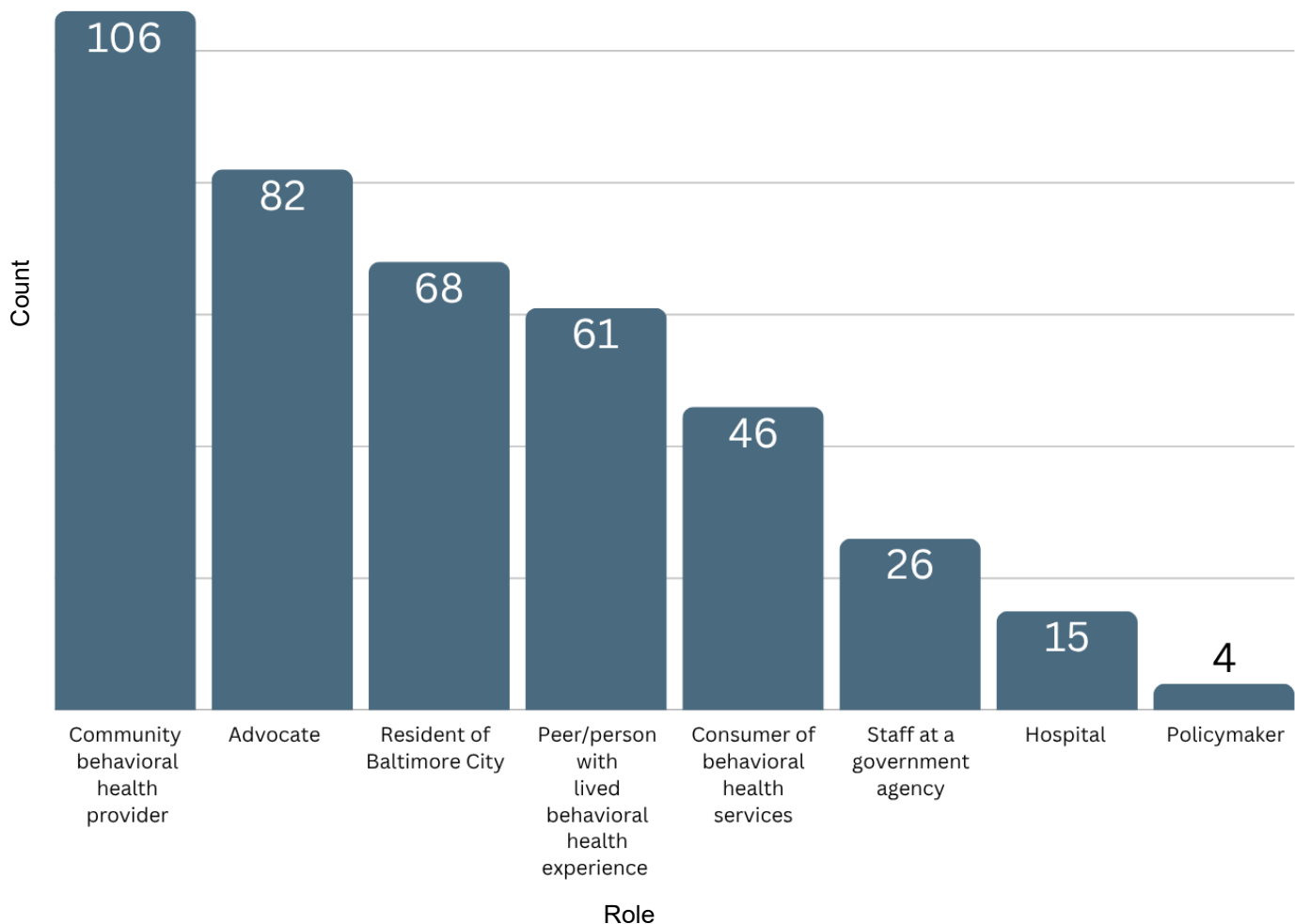


Behavioral Health System Baltimore (BHSB) pursues public policies that support behavioral health and wellness in Baltimore City. To center our policy work, we invited communities and partners to help identify policy issues that are most important to our community. Over the summer, BHSB distributed a community survey and met with more than a dozen partners to discuss how behavioral health policy impacts them. BHSB synthesized this information, along with an assessment of the political and budgetary environment, to establish policy priorities for 2026 and 2027. Here is a summary of the insights we gathered.

Community Survey

BHSB fielded a digital community survey (May-August 2025) through our organizational newsletters and social media platforms, as well as networks of consumer, community, advocacy, and health provider groups. The survey was completed by 188 respondents from a wide cross section of community and advocacy partners (Figure 1).

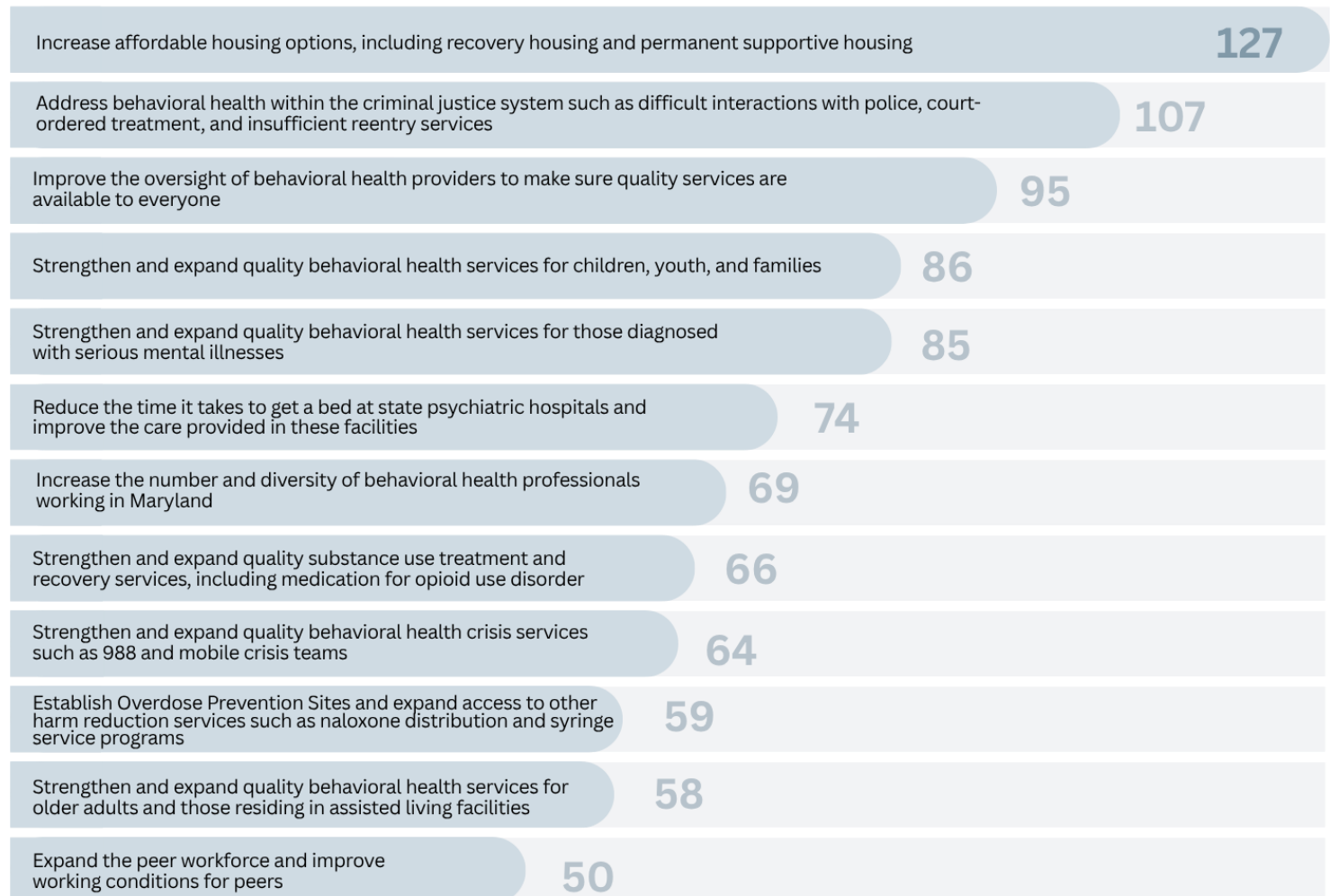
Figure 1: Respondent Roles and Affiliations in Behavioral Health Advocacy





The survey solicited both quantitative and qualitative information on potential policy priorities. In the quantitative section, respondents were presented with a list of 12 potential priorities and asked to select and rank up to five priorities (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Top Policy Goals Selected by Respondents for BHSB's 2026-2027 Priorities



Three potential policy priorities rose to the top: 1) affordable housing, 2) the intersection of behavioral health and criminal justice, and 3) oversight and quality of behavioral health services in the public behavioral health system. This was true for all respondents collectively, as well as for individual groups such as Baltimore City residents and persons with lived experience. Efforts to strengthen services for children, youth, and families, as well as services for those with serious mental illness, also ranked high. Policies to expand crisis services ranked lower, potentially indicating that the community recognizes that progress has been achieved in recent years, such as securing a permanent funding source for 988. Expanding access to harm reduction services also ranked low, potentially in recognition of the challenging political environment for such services.





Survey respondents also shared feedback through open-ended questions about policy priorities and issues. There were responses from 88 participants, including suggestions for additional policy priority consideration.

Partner Conversations and Community Suggestions

To better understand important issues for community organizations, BHSB interviewed 11 community partners, and spoke to BHSB staff who work directly with partner organizations. Some of the priorities that emerged are listed below:

- Ensuring adequate reimbursement rates for behavioral health services and maintaining other sources of funding
- Mitigating the instability of federal funding and changing federal policy
- Improving mental health services provided in substance use treatment settings
- Providing better support in getting connected to services
- Improving care coordination and case management
- Increasing the number of hospital psychiatric beds
- Providing more behavioral health training and education to providers and the public
- Increasing quality standards and improving access to outcome metrics and other data
- Limiting the number of new providers and addressing providers who do not meet quality standards
- Ensuring access to services for immigrants and those with limited English proficiency
- Reducing the interactions between those with behavioral health concerns and law enforcement
- Addressing concerns regarding assisted outpatient treatment
- Addressing trauma related to community and gun violence
- Addressing the social determinants of health such as transportation, employment, and housing
- Providing protections from arrest for harm reduction program participants and staff
- Preventing overdose through naloxone distribution, bad batch alerts, and safe supply policies

Two key themes emerged from the suggestions provided by survey respondents and partner conversations. The first revolved around the promotion of high-quality behavioral health services. Several recommendations focused on policies that could address low-quality, under-performing programs. Specific concerns were raised about low-quality substance use providers, recovery homes, and psychiatric rehabilitation providers. Partners and community members recognized the critical role that local behavioral health authorities (LBHA) such as BHSB must play in holding providers accountable and ensuring quality services are delivered. They recommended that BHSB pursue policies that would authorize the oversight and authority at the state and local level needed to ensure high quality across the system.





“Recovery housing is a mess. There are too many bad players. We need statewide regulations”

Another common theme was fear and uncertainty regarding federal policy changes. Some community respondents and partners expressed concerns about immigrants and their ability to access needed behavioral health services. Some also worried about federal policy changes related to harm reduction and homelessness. The most common federal policy issue shared by partners was reduced federal funding for behavioral health services. The Medicaid changes that mandate work requirements and more frequent eligibility checks are likely to reduce Medicaid coverage and impact the state budget. Partners made several suggestions to prioritize policies that mitigate the impact of these changes.

Concerns about federal funding dovetailed with many other concerns about state funding and behavioral health workforce challenges. Many of the suggestions from the survey and partner conversations highlighted funding and workforce questions, such as ensuring adequate reimbursement rates for behavioral health services, providing adequate salaries for staff, and amending behavioral health professional licensure requirements. Partners also highlighted the [Maryland Health Care Commission report on the behavioral health workforce](#) and the numerous recommendations that have not been implemented.

“Addressing behavioral health workforce shortage and increasing fair/competitive compensation for behavioral healthcare workers (all levels of care).”

Harm reduction was suggested several times in the open-ended responses but did not rank especially high in the survey on policy priorities. Several suggestions from the survey centered on harm reduction or overdose prevention more broadly. Long-standing harm reduction priorities were also discussed in many partner conversations. Overdose prevention centers and safe supply were two specific suggestions that are currently not available in Maryland. Partners also shared the importance of BHSB being engaged with local policies and local opioid settlement funding decisions.





**“Insure ORF monies are appropriately invested
(Tall order, I know!)”**

Another long-standing priority that did not rank especially high in the survey was expanding the crisis system. However, addressing criminal justice involvement of those with behavioral health concerns did rank high and several suggestions from partners linked crisis services explicitly to reducing law enforcement and criminal justice involvement. This has also been raised in other community forums in Baltimore. Other important issues that were highlighted by partners included addressing juvenile justice involvement, improving forensic psychiatric facilities, and monitoring assisted outpatient treatment implementation.

**“For the criminal justice space, having
non-police contacts is crucial.”**

This year’s community engagement process was among the more robust efforts BHSB has undertaken. We received valuable information to guide our advocacy efforts for key policy priorities for the next two years. Overall, it is clear Baltimore communities and behavioral health advocates have many varied priorities, but there is also notable consensus. BHSB will continue to advocate to address these concerns and achieve these goals.

