

The Daily Cardinal

Est. 1892



STATE NEWS

Budget agreement includes funding for virtual mental health services on smaller UW campuses

Funding for mental health services for University of Wisconsin System students in the state budget follows a bill Republican Senators introduced requiring campuses with less than 30,000 students to partner with a mental health care provider.

By [Joseph Panzer](#)

July 31, 2025 | 4:00am CDT

The 2025-27 Capitol Budget [passed](#) at the beginning of July includes \$7 million for virtual mental health services to University of Wisconsin students at all campuses apart from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The inclusion of the funding follows a bill introduced by Sen. Jesse James, R-Thorp, and Senate Republicans on June 2 to address mental health issues among UW System students.

The [bill](#) requires campuses with less than 30,000 full-time undergraduates to partner with a private mental health care provider contracted by the UW Board of Regents. The provider must include "evidence-based clinical wellness content and behavioral health coaches" in their programming while employing licensed providers with experience serving university students.

"Near my district, UW-Eau Claire and UW-Stout utilize [tele-mental health] services at some of the highest rates in the state," James said. "I see this as both an investment in our college kids and an investment in north-central Wisconsin."

James also cited a recent U.S. News and World Report [survey](#) finding 70% of students experienced mental health struggles since starting college, which experts believe is tied to the pandemic's effect on education when current students were in high school or college. The same [survey](#) found only 77% of students who wanted mental health support successfully obtained it, and 7% had to wait more than three months for support.

The stipulation that these contracted services are only required for campuses with less than 30,000 undergraduates [includes](#) every school in the UW System except for UW-Madison because James believes the university "already has its own successful program and didn't need the same state assistance."

UW-Madison currently partners with private providers [Uwill](#) and [Togetherall](#) to offer virtual mental health care services to students.

The National Education Association [reports](#) students from rural communities like Northern Wisconsin often let mental health issues go untreated due to a culture that does not talk about mental health and understaffed campus counseling centers.

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater student Kaylee Kramer — who is on the executive board of the [Active Minds](#) mental health advocacy group — remains cautiously optimistic about the effects of this change.

"I absolutely believe that the aims and provisions are feasible, but that is not to say that it will be an easy or overnight change," Kramer told the Cardinal. "The most important thing would be to ensure that the students' voices are heard throughout the transitional phase of service, especially if certain minority voices were to speak out and highlight mental health services that they feel are needed the most."

According to the [National Institutes of Health](#), Asian American, Latino and multiracial college students are more likely to have elevated depression symptoms than their peers of other ethnic groups, while those with mental health needs in all minority groups were receiving treatment at a rate significantly less than their white peers.

Racial disparities in access to mental health services present a challenge for campuses like UW-Milwaukee, which has 36% minority enrollment, [according](#) to U.S. News and World Report.

Kramer noted the bill "would make mental health services more accessible to many students" by requiring the contractors to provide services outside of standard business hours, which she believes is convenient for students trying to manage both academics and a job.

"Introducing new forms of mental health services would not take away from what the school currently provides — it will only build the program up," Kramer said. "A new provider could encourage students who have previously sought mental health services to continue their journey while also providing others to take the step towards starting their journey."

The [University of Texas System](#) partnered with private provider TimelyCare to expand access to 24/7 mental health services for students in 2023, creating precedent for this model. A wellness [report](#) from UT Austin during the program's first year found that 1,443 students accessed TimelyCare services, marking an increase in overall health care provided.

James said his intention with this bill is to support young people during this "challenging" and "formative" time in their life, saying "providing access to these critical services ensures that college students across the state can get the resources they need to thrive both academically and personally."

The funding was not a part of the system's [initial](#) \$856 million dollar request. Legislators and Gov. Tony Evers [approved](#) a \$256 million increase in the UW System, the largest in over two decades, but a fraction of the \$856 million request.


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