

INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH INTO UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE IN SOUTH AFRICA



In South Africa, **fewer than 1 in 10 people** living with a mental health condition receive the care they need. While **5%** of the national health budget is spent on mental health, **87%** of this goes towards advanced hospital care – which is often inaccessible and costly – despite the availability of more cost-effective and rights- and community-based alternatives.

So, as the country moves towards universal health coverage (UHC) reforms, there is an urgent need to make sure mental health is not left behind.

THE OPPORTUNITY

At the start of 2022, deliberations on the national health insurance (NHI) bill were underway. At the same time, the national strategic plan for HIV 2023-2028 was being drafted and the country coordinating mechanism for the Global Fund was preparing an application for more health financing as part of the Global Fund's new grant cycle 7.

These developments made 2022 an ideal window to advocate for the integration of mental health into South Africa's UHC and health financing reforms. The South African Federation for Mental Health (SAFMH), which was part of the public consultation on the NHI bill and works at grassroots and community level, was the ideal partner to help achieve this monumental systemic change.

ABOUT SAFMH

SAFMH is the largest national mental health federation in South Africa. Its national office is situated in Johannesburg, and 17 constituent bodies, known as mental health societies, are located in all nine South African provinces. SAFMH has played an important role as an advocacy body, promoting community mental health care.

PARTNERING FOR IMPACT

With UnitedGMH support, SAFMH held workshops to consult people with lived experience of mental health and neurological conditions on gaps in mental and neurological healthcare. These workshops informed the development of a three-year advocacy strategy covering:

- the integration of mental health in the NHI bill
- the implementation of existing mental health legislation and policies
- the integration of mental health in UHC policies and programmes
- increased investment in primary and community care, and promotion and prevention services as part of UHC.

The workshops not only ensured the inclusion of people with lived experience in the SAFMH strategy, but also benefited those who participated:



“This workshop opened my idea of thinking about government and policies and thinking about what the government can do for us.” - SAFMH workshop participant

“Sometimes you go through very low points in your life and this session made me realise that there are workshops and people out there who are working to help you with your mental health and are making a plan to help you overcome this.” - SAFMH workshop participant

A communications strategy was then developed to engage key stakeholders across a wide range of sectors – from health departments to the Global Fund to the media – to champion calls for mental health care as part of UHC.

MAJOR ADVOCACY SUCCESSSES

By working together, UnitedGMH and SAFMH were able to score some major advocacy successes in 2022.

- After months of SAFMH advocacy, the Mental Health Directorate at the National Department of Health started renewing the lapsed Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan (MHPF). The policy and accompanying action plan identifies activities that will help transform mental health services in South Africa. It aims to ensure that quality mental health services are accessible, equitable, comprehensive and integrated at all levels of the health system, in line with World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations.
- In September 2022, South Africa launched its national strategic plan on non-communicable diseases (NCDs). It sets out the nation’s next steps towards achieving the SDGs and moving towards UHC using a person-centred approach. SAFMH’s engagement with the NCD Alliance meant mental health was meaningfully included in the strategic plan.

- SAFMH strengthened its relationships with key stakeholders leading the charge on UHC reforms in South Africa, including the National Health Insurance Portfolio Committee, the National Department of Social Development, the WHO Country Office and others.



“This consultancy was extremely helpful. It incentivised strategic thinking and long-term planning. Beyond the grant, the mentorship received by UGMH was excellent. It helped connect our national work to global work and taught us best practices for how one might go about developing and implementing advocacy efforts. We would strongly encourage UGMH to consider offering these opportunities to other national mental health organisations seeking to prioritise and setting time aside for developing their UHC advocacy.”

Shayni Geffen Project Leader, Advocacy & Awareness, SAFMH

NEXT STEPS ON THE PATH TO UHC

- The renewed Mental Health Policy Framework will be launched in 2023. SAFMH will be working with the National Department of Health and other sectors to support its implementation and the delivery of accessible, equitable and quality mental health services as part of UHC.
- SAFMH will engage in the process of updating the National Strategic Plan for HIV/TB 2023-2028 to ensure mental is included as a key consideration. This will also create a favourable environment for mental health advocacy as part of the country dialogue and funding request development process for the Global Fund’s 2023-2025 allocation period.
- The NHI bill is set to be passed in 2023, and SAFMH will work with key partners to support the implementation of its mental health components.
- SAFMH will meet with Médecins Sans Frontières and the WHO’s Country Office to explore ways to integrate mental health as a cross cutting component of UHC system reforms in all sectors of society, including health systems.
- In November and December 2022, SAFMH held meetings with the National Department of Social Development to explore ways to increase policymakers’ mental health literacy, which will be actioned in 2023.
- SAFMH worked closely with the South African Disability Alliance (SADA) to draft a powerful advocacy tool – the Shadow Report on the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which will be submitted in 2023. It identifies and recommends how to address the gaps in the provision of the rights guaranteed under the convention for people with mental health conditions in South Africa.