Mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions in the United States and around the world. One in four Americans will experience a diagnosable mental illness in a given year. Even the most serious mental health conditions can be treated, however, allowing people to better contribute to their families and communities.

Through its Mental Health Program, The Carter Center works to promote awareness about mental health issues, inform public policy, achieve equity for mental health care comparable to other health care, and reduce stigma and discrimination against those with mental health and substance-use conditions, both in the United States and internationally. The Center’s work is currently focused in four areas:

- Promoting behavioral health in communities through policy reform
- Reducing stigma and discrimination through journalism
- Developing mental health services in Liberia
- Improving equitable access to quality services in Georgia

Promoting Behavioral Health in Communities Through Policy Reform

The Carter Center has maintained its core mission of reducing stigma and promoting access to care, while also being responsive to global and policy events as they unfold.

The Carter Center uses its convening power to bring together medical professionals, business leaders, consumers, and policymakers to discuss public policy issues facing mental health and substance-use care systems nationwide and at the state level. As integrated care has become the accepted standard in primary care, The Carter Center has followed the field toward the management of health within defined populations. The Carter Center is now leading an effort to establish a role for behavioral health care and health promotion activities within population health initiatives. As population health policies begin to be drafted and implemented, the Center will help identify potential policy levers to increase the role and importance of behavioral health in the policy efforts around population health and cultures of wellness.

Reducing Stigma and Discrimination Through Journalism

Better-informed reporting has the potential to correct public misconceptions, encourage those living with mental illnesses to seek treatment, and create positive change in public policies and treatment service systems.

The Rosalynn Carter Fellowships for Mental Health Journalism provide stipends to journalists to report on topics related to mental health or mental illnesses. The program’s goals include the following: increase accurate reporting on mental health issues and decrease incorrect, stereotypical information; help journalists produce high-quality work through exposure to reliable resources in the field; and develop a cadre of better-informed professional journalists who will more accurately report information and influence their peers to do the same.
Since the program’s establishment in 1996, journalism fellows have produced over 1,500 stories, documentaries, books, and other works during and after their fellowship year, many of which have received prestigious awards. The fellowship provides support and technical assistance to select countries to build fellowships of their own with independent programs now operational in New Zealand and South Africa. The Carter Center has developed unique expertise in stigma reduction through mental health journalism.

Developing Mental Health Services in Liberia

As a result of rigorous programming over the last six years, The Carter Center is recognized as the leading nongovernmental organization for mental health in post-conflict Liberia.

The Carter Center and its partners have trained and graduated over 200 mental health clinicians, including more than 40 who specialize in children and adolescents. The Carter Center is continuing its engagement in Liberia on mental health until 2018, with the goal of handing the program over to the Liberian government. Current activities continue to focus on training a cadre of specialized mental health workers to address child and adolescent behavioral health issues post-Ebola, promoting the adoption of a national mental health law, and developing culturally competent advocacy and anti-stigma activities.

Improving Equitable Access to Quality Mental Health Services in Georgia

In Georgia, The Carter Center works in three areas: integrating behavioral health into population health, monitoring a settlement agreement between the state and the U.S. Department of Justice, and implementing a child and adolescent mental health initiative.

The Carter Center has been working to improve health policy in Georgia to implement evidence-based approaches to integrated behavioral and primary health care, including a training program for federally funded primary and behavioral health centers, a policy advisory group, and support to a legislative committee on data collection.

Following a 2008 lawsuit filed against the state of Georgia for failing to provide safe institutional care for mental health patients, the Center convened a community stakeholders group to drive system reform and provide input for a community-based mental health system. In October 2010, a settlement was reached whereby Georgia agreed to provide community crisis services. The Carter Center continues to monitor this settlement and its implementation.

The Carter Center is working to strategically address the lack of community behavioral health services for children and adolescents in Georgia. In Northwest Georgia, the Center is working to divert vulnerable children and adolescents and their families to treatment instead of the criminal justice system.

In Liberia, 21 clinicians specializing in child and adolescent mental health graduated in March 2017 from a training developed by the Carter Center’s Mental Health Program in partnership with the Liberian government.