What outstanding needs and priorities does the County still have with regard to continuum of care needs, especially with regard to options available when a distress call comes in to the county and where a person experiencing a mental health crisis can be taken besides the jail?

In 2016, Behavioral Wellness (BeWell) developed and presented a comprehensive capital facility report to the Board that set forth the overall need for Acute, Crisis, Residential and Supportive Living beds for the mental health continuum of care. Multiple beds/facilities have been added since 2016 to support and enhance the continuum of mental health care in Santa Barbara County.

Key crisis facilities provided in the continuum include the South County Crisis Stabilization Center (CSU) and the Psychiatric Health Facility (PHF). Each of these facilities has mandated staffing to client ratios. COVID-19 impacts, combined with ongoing difficulties in the retention of psychiatric health nurses, have recently affected nursing staff at the PHF and CSU. Staffing shortages impacted BeWell’s ability to operate the PHF and CSU at maximum capacity—16 and 8 beds, respectively—on several occasions in 2020 and 2021.

This shortage of licensed nursing staff can be addressed with per diem or other contracted nursing staff at the PHF, specifically for the night shift. On-demand staffing to address vacancies and sick time is needed to ensure both facilities operate at maximum capacity. To the extent that per diem or contract nurses are used to temporarily backfill for vacant funded positions while Human Resources completes a recruitment process, there is minimal, if any, net budgetary impact.

The County Executive Office will work with BeWell and Human Resources to develop options for the department to address ad hoc staffing needs caused by position vacancies or periods of employee leave. In addition, the County is pursuing additional options for CSU services with hospital partners.