SIMPLY PUT, Texas doesn’t have enough health care professionals to address its mental health needs. That problem isn’t unique to Texas, but the state’s workforce shortfall is especially acute. Mental Health America, a national nonprofit dedicated to improving care for mental illness, ranked Texas 50th out of the 50 states and District of Columbia in access to mental health care (tma.tips/MentalHealthAmerica).

The data on this page are designed to show where some of the greatest needs are in addressing behavioral health. But they come with a caveat. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unusual exodus of behavioral health care professionals at all levels that current statistics don’t reveal, says Brian Hepburn, executive director of the National Association of State Mental Health Directors. Many of them are leaving because of “anti-public health behavior they haven’t dealt with previously,” he said in an email interview.

However, the pandemic also has created an opportunity for mental health by expanding the use of telemedicine (See “Telemedicine’s Tipping Point,” page 44). And earlier this year, the Texas Legislature approved a Texas Medical Association-supported $339 million increase in behavioral health funding, including funding for new state hospital construction. This comes on the heels of other sessions in which lawmakers increased funding for psychiatric residencies, funded loan-repayment plans for mental health professionals, and established the Child Psychiatric Access Network (CPAN), says David Lakey, MD, vice chancellor for health affairs and chief medical officer at The University of Texas System and presiding officer for CPAN. (See “Making the Right Call, page 26”).

“The Texas Legislature has continued to show strong support of improving the Texas mental health system over the last several sessions,” he said.

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As of September 2020, Texas has 410 mental health care professional shortage areas, second only to California with 536.

Texas needed 644 health care professionals to remove that status, more than any other state.

The number of people living in these health professional shortage areas is more than 15 million.

Second-place California had 9.3 million.

Sources: Health Resources & Services Administration (tma.tips/HRSA-HPSA); Kaiser Family Foundation (tma.tips/KFF-HPSAs)