

Supporting Your Loved One in Treatment: A Brief Guide for Families and Caregivers

Understanding DSH and Your Role as a Caregiver

The purpose of this guide is to help families and caregivers understand more about the California Department of State Hospitals (DSH). It offers guidance on what to expect and how to best support your loved one. It also provides tips on how to work together with DSH.

These insights help you respect the autonomy and self-determination of your loved one.



About the Department of State Hospitals (DSH)

The California Department of State Hospitals (DSH) provides inpatient mental health treatment for individuals who have serious mental illness (SMI). These people may also be involved in the legal system or require specialized psychiatric care. DSH staff work to support their safety, treatment, stabilization, and discharge planning.



Your Role as a Family Member or Caregiver

Families and caregivers are important partners in the treatment process. Research shows that people who have strong family support systems do better in recovery. That means your involvement matters!

Families and caregivers often know important details about loved ones. This can help improve treatment planning and engagement. This includes their:

- Personal history
- Strengths
- Challenges
- Specific needs



How Can Families and Caregivers Play a Meaningful Role

- Share important history and observations
- Advocate respectfully and consistently
- Support communication and connection
- Help identify strengths, preferences, and supports
- Participate in planning when appropriate
- Encourage your loved one to engage in treatment

Understanding the DSH Role and Limitations

Family and caregiver involvement is highly valued at DSH. DSH recognizes that families and caregivers often provide important support and insights. DSH encourages patients and families to work together with the treatment team whenever possible.

At the same time, all parties must follow privacy laws at all times. DSH must also establish and maintain a trusting therapeutic relationship with each patient. This is essential to effective care. So while family and caregiver perspectives can be valuable, it is also key to:

- Preserve the therapeutic relationship
- Respect each patient's autonomy
- Support open communication

There may be times when these reasons may outweigh the benefits of getting more input. So DSH staff may limit the information they share with families or caregivers without a patient's knowledge or consent.

What DSH Can Often Help With

- Psychiatric evaluation and treatment
- Medication management
- Therapy and rehabilitation services
- Safety planning within the facility
- Discharge and transition planning
- Coordination with courts, legal representatives, and community providers
- Provide general updates (e.g., treatment progress) when appropriate and permitted by law
- Help a patient identify what family members and supporters they want as part of their treatment team and obtain appropriate releases

What Staff May Not Be Able to Help With at Times

- Share confidential medical information without consent
- Discuss details of treatment if a patient declines permission
- Immediately change medications or treatment plans based on family and caregiver requests alone
- Override legal or court-related requirements
- Guarantee a discharge timeline
- Share information that may impact patient safety or privacy

What to Expect During Treatment

Treatment and stabilization can take time. This is especially true for people who experience:

- Serious mental illness
- Trauma
- Cognitive challenges
- Substance use concerns
- Legal system involvement

Progress may not always be in a straight line. Some people improve quickly. Others may experience setbacks or periods of instability.

Sharing Information with the DSH Treatment Team

Helpful Information to Share About Your Loved One

- Mental health history and past diagnoses
- Medication experiences
- Trauma history when relevant and appropriate
- Signs that their condition may be worsening
- Daily routines
- How they prefer to communicate
- Cultural, language, spiritual, or religious considerations
- Effective coping strategies or what has helped them in the past
- Interests and hobbies
- Goals, hopes, and dreams
- Positive supports, like friends or families

Keep a Simple Log

If you keep a log, it may help you remember and share valuable information about your loved one. Write down things like who you spoke with, when, and what was discussed. This can help you remember details, follow up on questions, and stay organized over time. A log may include:

- Dates and names of DSH staff you speak with
- Updates or concerns about your loved one
- Next steps or follow-up guidance



Communicating Effectively with DSH Treatment Team

When You Talk With the Treatment Team

- Talk with them calmly and respectfully
- Focus on specific behaviors or changes
- Use factual examples when possible
- Write down questions as they come up – if you keep questions on your phone, that's a great way to always have them with you
- Ask questions any time you do not understand something

Questions You May Consider Asking DSH Staff

- What are the current treatment goals?
- What progress has been observed?
- What challenges are affecting improvement right now?
- How can family members support current treatment goals?
- What family and caregiver support may be helpful after discharge?
- What supports and services may be helpful after discharge?
- Who should we contact with future questions?

How to Stay Connected with Your Loved One and Take Care of Yourself

Connection and support can make a helpful impact on your loved one's trajectory. Families and loved ones play a key role in recovery and treatment engagement. It can help your loved one feel supported, grounded, and connected to their community.

Your advocacy, communication, support, observations, and persistence can make a meaningful difference. Try to offer regular:

- Communication
- Encouragement
- Emotional support

Take Care of Yourself

It can be emotionally difficult to support someone who has serious mental illness and/or legal system involvement. When you look after yourself, it can ensure that you are ready to support your loved one.

Here are tips to take care of yourself and your personal needs:

- Seek support from trusted friends, family, faith community, or support groups
- Take breaks when needed
- Set healthy, realistic boundaries
- Learn about serious mental illness and your loved one's condition(s)
- Speak with your own mental health professional
- Engage in physical activity
- Get enough sleep
- Pay attention to your stress levels

If You Feel Your Concerns are Not Being Addressed

- Speak with a supervisor
- Contact a Patients' Rights Advocate
- Request clarification about policies or processes
- Keep notes about concerns and follow-up conversations
- Contact organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) to learn about patient's rights and identify support networks for families and loved ones who are affected by mental illness

Helpful Resources

[California Department of State Hospitals \(DSH\)](#)

[National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#)

[Treatment Advocacy Center](#)

[Disability Rights California](#)

[SAMHSA Family and Caregiver Resources](#)