The San Francisco Department of Public Health’s top priority is patient care. Every day, we make decisions across our system that put patient care and safety first. We strive to provide the most care to the most people at the right level, in a high-quality, safe and healing environment.

We share the urgency to improve the lives of San Franciscans who are experiencing homelessness, mental illness and substance use disorder. These residents are in great need of care and housing, and their health affects our entire community.

We have chosen to pause changes at the Behavioral Health Center while the Mayor and Board of Supervisors have a conversation about how to proceed in a way that accomplishes our shared goals of patient safety, stability and expanded access to services.

We restate our commitment to ensure the long-term stability of board and care services, including the Adult Residential Facility (ARF). It is not correct to say we have “closed” or planned to close the ARF. No one is or will be “evicted” at the ARF. All the residents there have a choice, and if any of them would prefer to move to an equivalent facility in the community or elsewhere at the Behavioral Health Center, we will work with them to do so. Further, no DPH staff are losing their jobs at the Behavioral Health Center. These have been our principles all along, and they have not changed.

We look forward to finding a path that also accomplishes the expansion of Hummingbird Place, an innovative, low-barrier psychiatric respite program that has been very successful. It fills a gap in our services, providing a safe and healing environment for clients who have had behavioral health crises and need a break from the streets to get the help and support that they need and to consider their next move toward wellness and recovery. The Hummingbird Place program is at the Behavioral Health Center (BHC) on the Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital campus, along with two board and care programs -- the ARF and the Residential Care Facility for the Elderly -- and the Mental Health Rehabilitation Center that provides locked, sub-acute care.

San Francisco is a passionate, compassionate community made up of people who care. At the Health Department, we are proud to be part of that work, and to lend our clinical expertise, evidence-based approach and deep experience addressing population health issues to solving today’s problems. Patient care and safety are core to our mission. We look forward to working with city leaders on a resolution that brings the best outcome for everyone served by the Behavioral Health Center.

Reforms to our system are underway

The problems of homelessness, mental illness and substance use disorder did not happen overnight, and they will take time to solve. San Francisco is not the only city with these issues, but
we are well positioned to tackle them. Our strong history of innovation, partnership and prioritizing public health problems is on our side as we continue to forge new programs, set priorities, use data to measure effectiveness and direct resources toward the greatest need.

The city’s most recent budget included $50 million in new investments in behavioral health beds and services that will help significantly.

But that’s not all. Mayor Breed and Director of Mental Health Reform Dr. Anton Nigusse Bland announced this month the Heal Our City initiative, which includes multiple new efforts, innovations and investments to address these challenges. Heal Our City will prioritize the approximately 4,000 homeless San Franciscans identified by a recent DPH analysis as having mental illness and substance use disorders.

As part of Heal Our City, for the first time, DPH and the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH) have a shared priority list of clients who have serious behavioral health issues and need housing. The initiative creates a multi-agency program emphasizing a “whatever it takes” approach to streamline housing and health care for the 230 most vulnerable members of the group. What we learn from this will be applied to better serve the larger population of 4,000.

Heal Our City also recognizes the urgent need to make services more available for everyone who needs them. That’s why, early next year, we will expand operations at our Behavioral Health Access Center at 1380 Howard St. from 40 to 65 hours per week.

We also announced a partnership this month among the City, DPH, Tipping Point Community and UCSF to address the intersection of behavioral health and homelessness. Tipping Point released its new report on homelessness and pledged up to $3 million to support additional low-barrier respite beds in the community for people with behavioral health issues.

Certainly, stabilizing board and care facilities is also crucial. There are more than 500 board and care beds in our system, both within and outside the City, which provide services for San Franciscans to allow them to live independently in the community. Most of these are run by independent operators, and the bed supply has been dwindling. Because many San Franciscans rely on these services, the Mayor and members of the Board of Supervisors announced several steps this month that the City will take to help San Francisco board and care operators continue to provide these services, including increasing funding and exploring the purchase of existing buildings that are at risk of closure.

We are fortunate that just about everyone in San Francisco wants to reach the goal of a healthy and equitable city. We are committed to using everything at our disposal to make that happen. We will continue to try new approaches, share information, listen to the community and answer questions in the weeks and months ahead. Together, we can design more paths to recovery and wellness for all San Franciscans.

Grant Colfax, MD
Director of Health