

# How Healing Design Can Overcome the Security-Comfort Tension in Behavioral Health Facilities

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## Inside, you'll find:

- Five core design characteristics for the new era of behavioral health facilities
- Emergency and extended stay behavioral health facility recommendations
- Case studies and floor plans
- Healing design insights

# Facility Planning Forum

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# Defining the Security-Comfort Tension

Nearly one in five American adults experiences mental illness, and 68% of adults with behavioral health conditions also have medical comorbidities. Historically, these patients have been societally stigmatized and providers have not had the financial incentives to create enough capacity to meet demand. The new focus on population health has changed the market. As health systems take on the risk of caring for large populations, managing the health of complex behavioral health (BH) patients is crucial to reducing expensive over-utilization. As rising prevalence and changing economics in behavioral health lead to a surge in new builds and renovations, providers and designers have the opportunity to truly support patients.

## Behavioral Health Utilization Impact



### Patients With Mental Illness Use Services Inappropriately

**1 in 8** Emergency department visits is associated with a behavioral health issue

*American Psychiatric Association, 2016*

**38%** Average increase in length of stay for patients with mental and/or substance abuse disorders

*Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development, 2010*

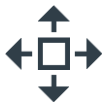
Clearly, design changes are needed. Historic models for BH facilities are outdated, dysfunctional, and contribute to the stigmatization of BH patients. Ward-style facilities, the liberal use of restraints, and institutional design have resulted in many BH units that prioritize security at the expense of patient dignity. Consequently, these facilities ignore the important role that comfort has to play in therapeutic environments. When patients are uncomfortable, they are less likely to heal.

Facility planners and architects need to dismantle that stigma by embracing concepts of healing design, which focus on the particular needs of the BH patient population while incorporating essential elements of security and comfort. Ultimately, the more residential designers can make a facility look, the less stigmatized and marginalized BH patients will feel. However, healing design is not cut and dry, given the difficulty of creating comfortable, homey facilities while also maintaining high security. Our goal in this whitepaper is to show that **although there is a tension between security and comfort, there does not always need to be a tradeoff.**

To achieve both security and comfort, designers are implementing five core characteristics of healing design into new era behavioral health environments.

- **Space flexibility** enables facilities like emergency departments to accommodate large volumes of BH patients, but also flex to meet the needs of non-BH patients.
- **Access to nature** and/or natural light creates a relaxing atmosphere to help individuals de-escalate.
- **Calming interior design**, including color palette, wall decorations, and furniture, contributes to the therapeutic environment.
- **Positive distractions**, such as music, televisions, arts and crafts, and exercise areas supplant patients' anxieties.
- **Clear lines of sight** from nurse stations are essential to preserve the security and safety of patients and staff.

## Core Design Characteristics in New Era of Behavioral Health Spaces



Space flexibility



Calming interior design



Positive distractions



Access to nature/natural light



Clear lines of sight

Undoubtedly, there is tension between ensuring security and promoting a therapeutic environment, and sometimes, facility planners need to prioritize one over the other. In this paper, we provide case studies of innovative facilities which are using one or more of these design characteristics to best navigate this tension in emergency and extended stay behavioral health settings.

Source: Population Health Advisor, "Behavioral Health Management Guide," available at: <https://www.advisory.com/research/population-health-advisor/resources/2017/behavioral-health-management-guide>; Facility Planning Forum interviews and analysis.

## Behavioral Health in the Emergency Department (ED)

Removing BH patients from the general ED environment can reduce stigma and improve security.

Given that one out of every eight ED visits is due to a BH issue, inappropriate utilization of the ED is a serious concern for many providers. The unpredictable volume of BH patients prevents timely triage, increases wait times, stretches physicians thin, and often requires a higher level of immediate, specialized care that strains many EDs. As a result, BH patients are often warehoused in ED spaces that are not designed to treat them, which can be dangerous and demoralizing for both patients and staff. Adequate BH patient care in ED settings has been a challenge, but designers and facility planners have found innovative ways to balance the security/comfort tension, primarily through space flexibility, positive distractions, and calming interior design.

Space flexibility encourages maximum utilization while also considering behavioral health needs.

Most EDs should have at least one, if not an entire pod, of 'swing rooms.' Swing rooms facilitate necessary medical treatment and are also outfitted to be safe for BH patients. Many facility planners are well-versed in their benefits. Swing rooms provide separate spaces for BH patients, where they can be removed from the chaotic ED environment. Additionally, providers can use swing rooms for non-BH patients to increase throughput and utilization and allow the space to flex to meet the needs of the ED patient population.

### Swing Rooms, Designed by ZGF



**Swing Room for Children at Legacy Randall Children's Hospital**

Garage doors hide medical gases and equipment

BH-safe furniture provides comfort and security

Children's spaces are brightly colored; adult spaces are more muted



**Swing Room for Adults at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center**

In larger EDs, having a dedicated pod of BH-specific swing rooms is beneficial for both BH and non-BH patients. Large pods should have small dayrooms that can accommodate BH patients who are in the ED for more than 24 hours. BH patients benefit by having their own dedicated space, and non-BH patients benefit by getting expedited care that might normally have been delayed due to ED overcrowding.

## Outfit separate areas for BH patients with positive distractions to help patients de-escalate.

Having separate areas for BH patients is the first step to accommodating BH needs in the ED. Space flexibility helps even small facilities achieve separation through swing rooms. Another building block towards meeting BH needs in the ED is providing positive distractions within separate BH areas.

This is exactly what Gwinnett Medical Center had in mind when it built its new 5,000-square-foot “behavioral health holding unit.” The unit, designed and built by Perkins+Will and JE Dunn Construction, respectively, is attached to the ED via a secure hallway and can accommodate up to eight patients at a time. Each patient bay is outfitted with positive distractions, such as a TV covered with unbreakable material and a window.

### Gwinnett Medical Center Behavioral Health Holding Unit



The holding unit's separation from the ED, combined with its incorporation of positive distractions, helps patients de-escalate more quickly while also increasing throughput of non-BH patients in the main ED. By embracing positive distractions, Gwinnett Medical Center has balanced the security/comfort tension in a way that benefits both BH and non-BH patients.



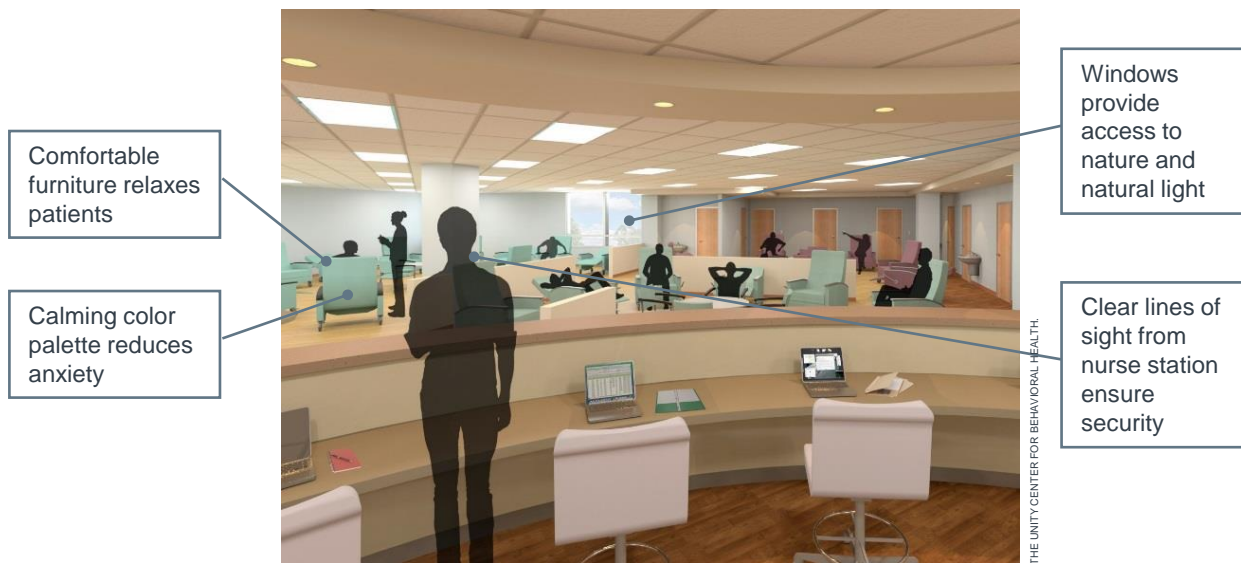
## Creating a perception of low security through interior design mitigates the security/comfort tension.

Cold, institutional wards focusing only on security leave BH patients feeling anxious and stigmatized. Calming interior design choices can completely shift the emphasis of a space from security to comfort, without sacrificing safety. Soft color palettes, comfortable furniture, nature-inspired wall decorations, and large open group spaces all promote healing.

The [Unity Center for Behavioral Health](#), located in Portland, Oregon, uses interior design to great effect.

Unity's innovative psychiatric emergency services (PES) unit is unique in that the main component is a large, therapeutic space—the milieu. The milieu is filled with comfortable recliners and serves as a patient rest and stabilization area. Unity chose a cheerful color palette in shades of blue, green, and mango that provides a calming atmosphere without triggering anxiety or agitation. Large windows let in plenty of natural light. The open atmosphere of the milieu flows into the open nurse station, which facilitates comprehensive lines of sight.

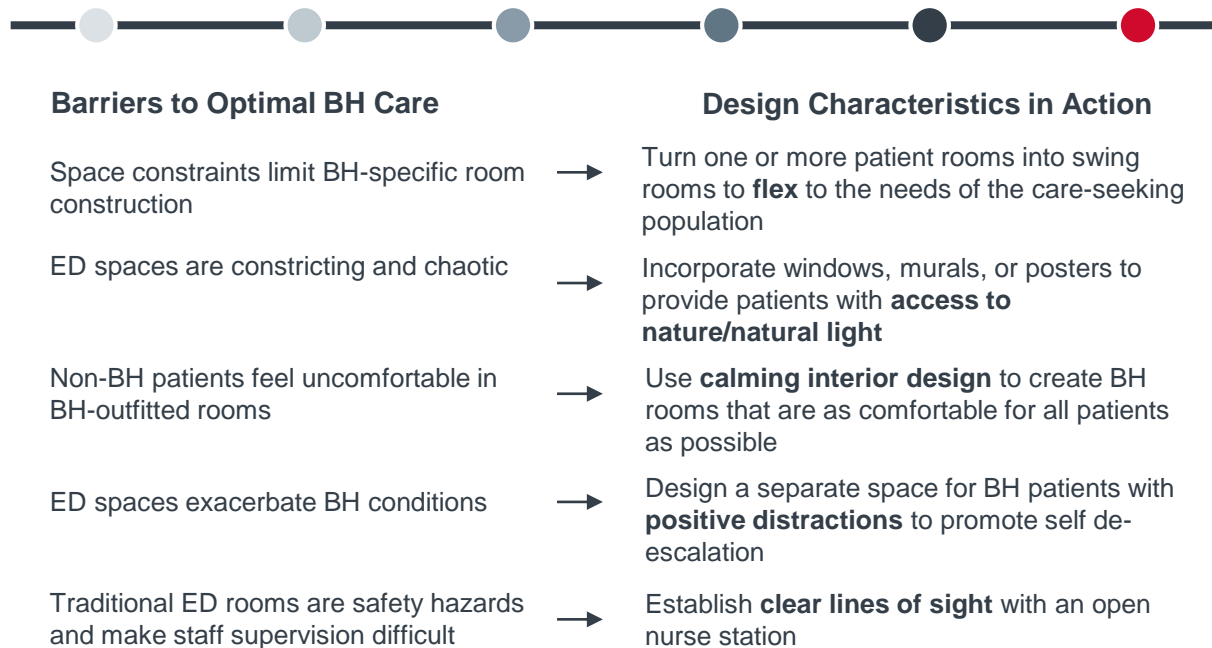
**The Unity Center for Behavioral Health PES Unit**



The nurse station was deliberately designed to be open and inviting to discourage the 'us versus them' mentality that can be conveyed by enclosed nurse stations. This adds to the perception of a low-security environment, but in reality, Unity's PES unit is a high-security space. Behind the open nurse station is an enclosed charting room, with medication rooms beyond that. As a result, patients perceive an open environment, while staff know that they have safe places to retreat if needed. All elements of the Unity design work to diffuse the hierarchy and authoritative atmosphere while seeming as familiar and comfortable as possible.

# Design Can Overcome ED Barriers

## Barriers and Design Solutions for BH Care in the ED



## Be Aware of Potential Flashpoints

!

### Potential Flashpoint: Entrances

- Ideally, BH patients would access the ED through the same entrance to reduce stigma
- Some hospitals have strong opinions about having separate entrances for BH patients
- If designed respectfully, separate entrances can maximize efficiency and safety; if designed without patient dignity in mind, separate entrances can enhance stigma and reduce needed care-seeking

!

### Potential Flashpoint: Nurse Station

- Many facilities are moving towards a passive security model with open nurse stations, which destigmatize patients and provide clear lines of sight
- Some hospitals have strong opinions about having closed nurse stations to ensure staff and patient safety
- Compromise: leave the patient-facing part of the nurse station open, and build an enclosed charting and shelter room behind



## Behavioral Health in Extended Stay Settings

In extended stay BH facilities, approximating real life and incorporating residential design normalizes BH issues and effectively balances security and comfort.

In the past, patients with BH conditions or mental health issues were placed in asylums, where institutionalization rather than rehabilitation was the goal. Today's extended stay BH facilities prioritize rehabilitation and are consequently becoming more aesthetically beautiful, mentally relaxing, and patient-friendly. Instead of intimidating patients, these facilities create welcoming environments. What makes a facility welcoming and familiar? The answer: by approximating real life. In these new residential-style facilities, patients have their own rooms, group spaces to socialize, areas to deal with external stimuli, and even places to go shopping. Facility planners and designers have the opportunity to make patient living as residential and close to 'real life' as possible.

“

“We need to create barriers without the appearance of barriers and promote security carefully.”

*Brian Champa, Huelat Davis Healing Design*

Creating a “real life” environment requires calming interior design, access to nature, and positive distractions.

Patients respond best to treatment when they feel at home, and facility planners and designers have the opportunity to create a homelike atmosphere.

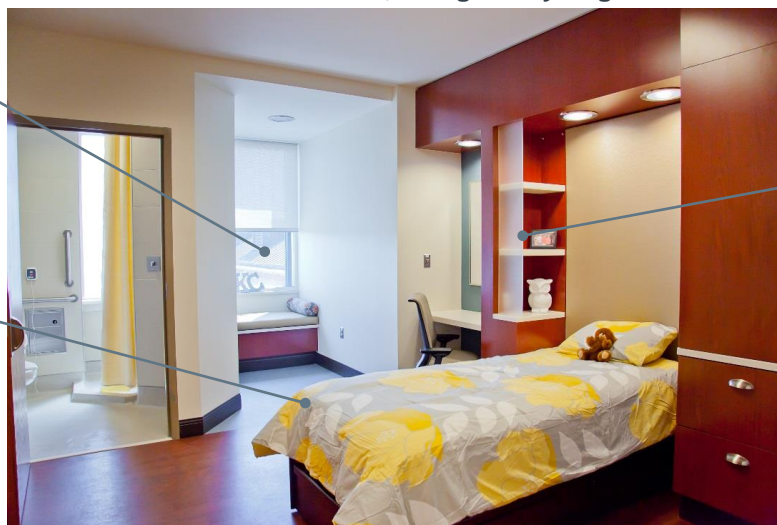
As previously discussed, a calming color palette consisting of blues and greens is ideal. Incorporating elements of nature is also beneficial, whether that be through indestructible murals, large graphic art elements, or secure healing gardens. Large windows with minimal or no window treatments provide natural light and minimize dark corners. Finally, positive distractions ranging from a digital fish tank to chalkboard-painted walls to gyms can help patients reconnect to what life outside the facility is like.

### Saint Francis Health System Laureate Institute for Brain Research, Designed by Page

Windows let in  
natural light

Cheery color  
palette reduces  
anxiety

Shelving and  
desk provide  
secure but  
residential  
touches



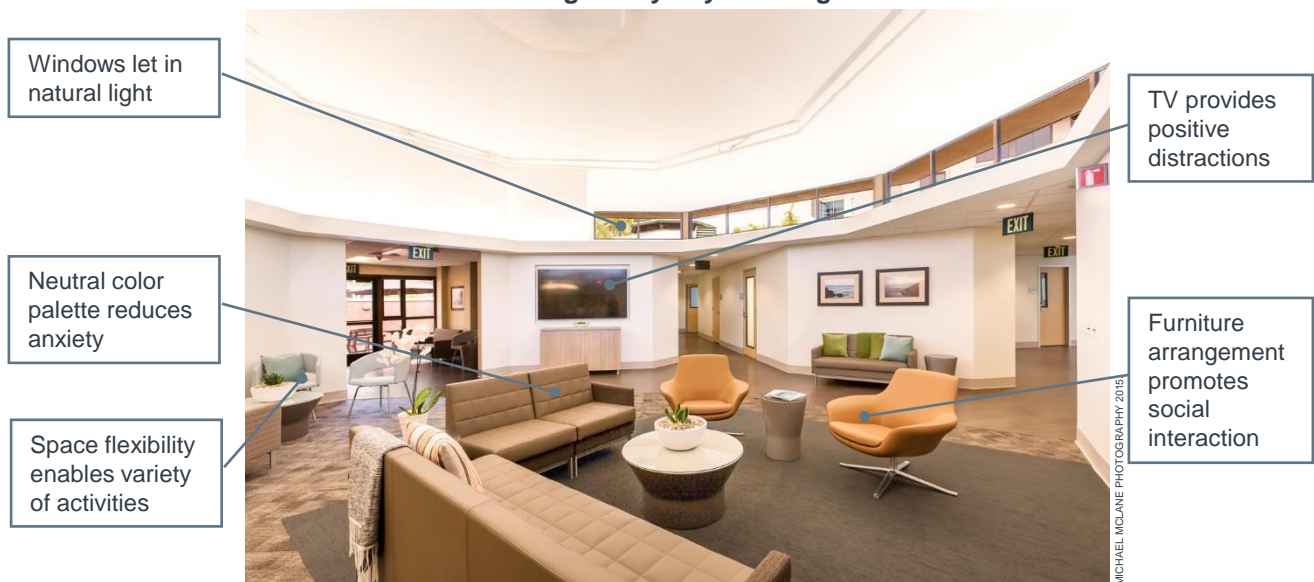
MINDA PALUGA 2014

## Group rooms should incorporate flexible design for maximum patient utilization.

Group areas serve as spaces where patients can carry out the routine of daily life, which aids in recovery. Simple common rooms foster social interactions and should be designed flexibly so that patients can engage in a variety of activities in one space, such as arts and crafts, games, and movies.

Using the same design characteristics, Taylor Design and Huelat Davis Healing Design executed these BH facilities very differently.

### Hoag Chemical Dependency Recovery Center, Designed by Taylor Design



### Merrifield Center, Designed by Huelat Davis Healing Design



## De-escalation Room

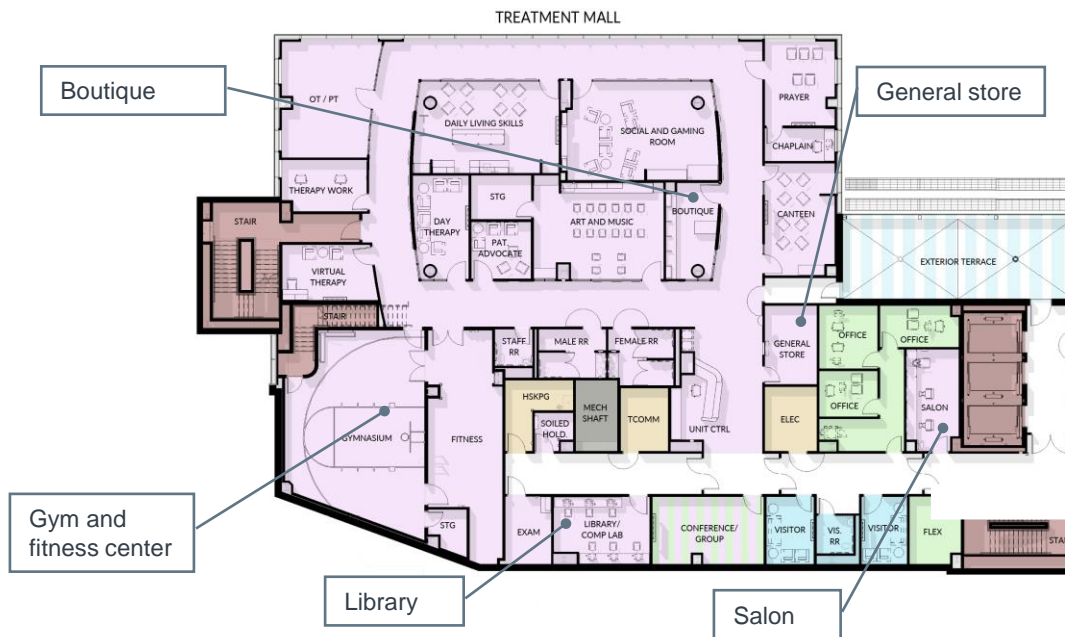
Positive distractions are a key feature of BH treatment and recovery. For facilities with available space, dedicated rooms for agitation reduction can be extremely therapeutic. One such example of a dedicated room is called a Snoezelen® room, which contains elements such as projectors, musical water beds, string lights, bubble tubes, and interactive wall panels. The goal of the Snoezelen® room is to provide a multi-sensory environment to help patients self-stabilize. For facilities that do not have the space or the patient volumes to dedicate an entire room for agitation reduction, consider creating flexible spaces in communal areas that contain positive distractions.

### Snoezelen®-Style Room Positive Distractions



## 'Main Street' Model

### The Neurodiagnostics Institute, Designed by BSA



For treatment centers with adequate space, a 'Main Street' model can simultaneously provide a residential feel and positive distraction. The Main Street space provides a very literal representation of a residential area, with quotidian spaces such as a diner, library, gym, and thrift shop, helping to deinstitutionalize the overall environment. Additionally, the Main Street space can be designed to accommodate different patient acuity levels, so that all patients at a given facility can feel engaged.

At the Neurodiagnostics Institute in Indianapolis, Ind., BSA designed amenities such as a general store and a boutique into the sixth floor 'treatment mall.' Centralizing services in one treatment mall encourages patients to socialize, and clearly divides activity and therapy space from residential sleeping space (which is on the other side of the sixth floor and comprises the entirety of the fifth floor). This distinction encourages patients to stay in common areas and work on their therapy rather than remain isolated in their rooms.

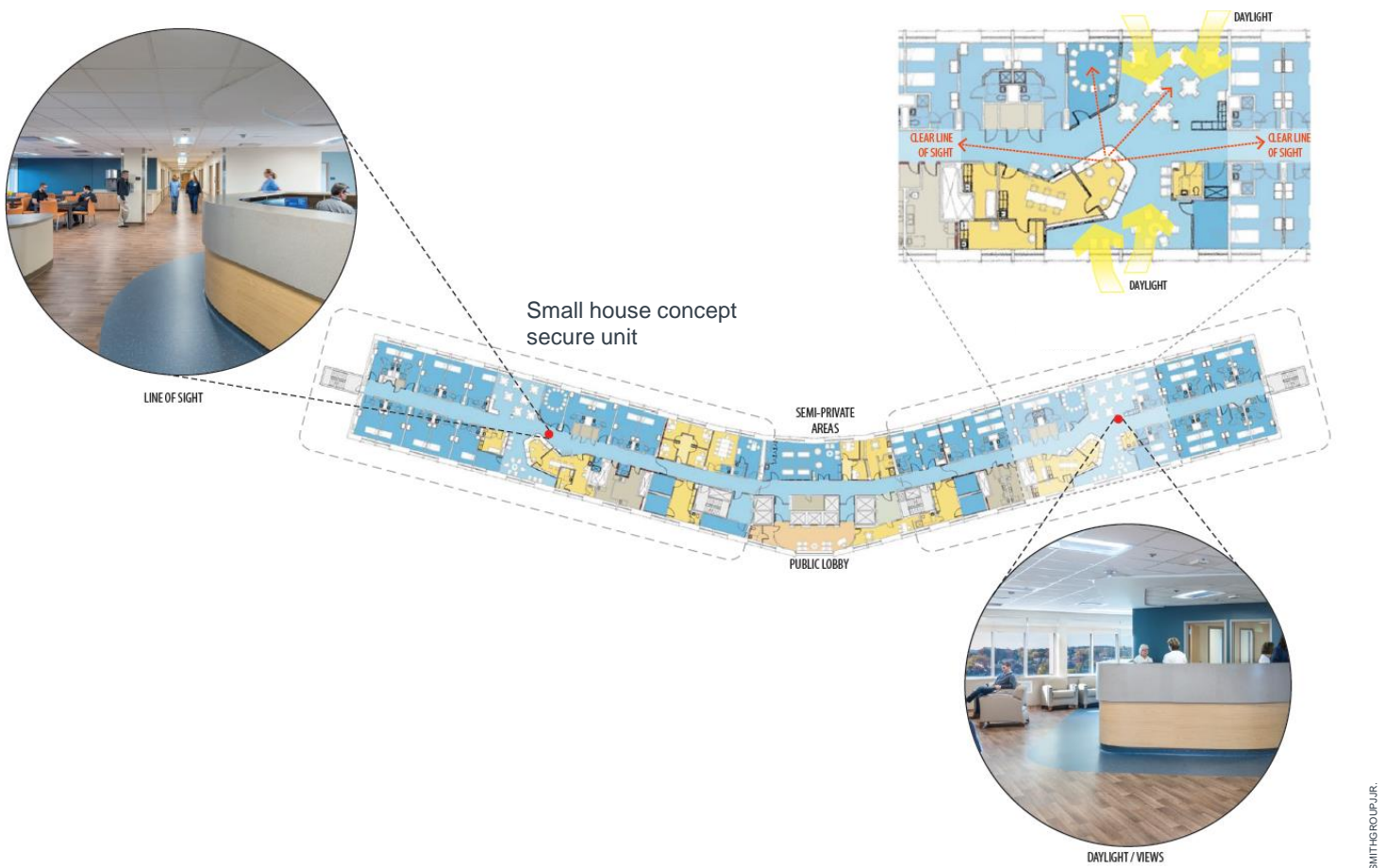


# Pod-style Facility Models Combine Residential Living, Healing Design, and Positive Distractions Without Compromising Security

Pod models separate different behavioral health populations into separate units, each of which contains patient rooms, group areas, and potentially treatment rooms.

SmithGroupJJR's Comprehensive Behavioral Health and Substance Use Disorders Program at MedStar Harbor Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, uses a pod model called the 'small house concept' as the main design framework. Each unit within a 'small house' houses 10-14 patients. Patients of different acuities are encouraged to socialize by having shared group spaces, such as therapy rooms, kitchens, dining rooms, and living rooms. A passive security model, which uses design-enabled clear sight lines, few control points, and easily controlled patient activity zones ensures patient and staff safety. Smaller staff-to-patient ratios, bright open spaces, controllable patient activity areas, and careful location of staff areas reduce violent outbursts without making patients feel as though they are overly restricted.

## MedStar Harbor Hospital, Designed by SmithGroupJJR

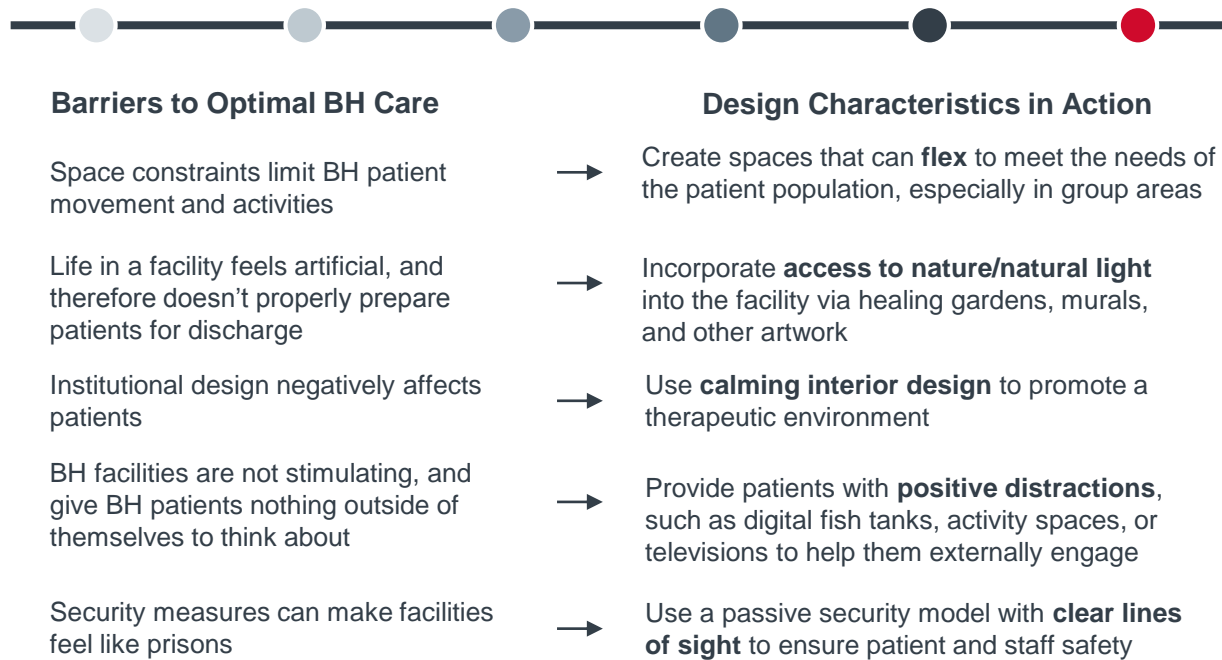


SMITHGROUPJJR.

Source: Facility Planning Forum interviews and analysis.

# Design Can Overcome Extended Stay Barriers

## Barriers and Design Solutions for BH Care in the ED



## Be Aware of Potential Flashpoints

### Potential Flashpoint: Private Room

- Private rooms tend to be the standard in behavioral health facilities
- Some hospitals have strong opinions about having shared patient rooms to facilitate healing and reduce social isolation
- Compromise: children and geriatric patients tend to benefit from having a roommate while adolescents and adults prefer private rooms

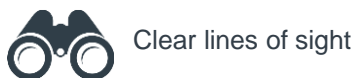
# Healing Design Can Bridge the Gap Between Security and Comfort

Design has a considerable impact on the quality and effectiveness of BH treatment and plays a key role in recovery for many patients. As a result, providers cannot underestimate the importance of comfortable and secure facilities to achieving population health goals. Architects and facility planners have the opportunity to lead the way in destigmatizing behavioral health.

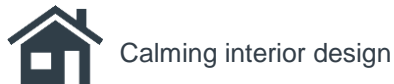
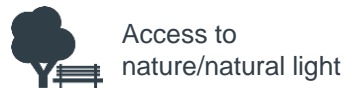
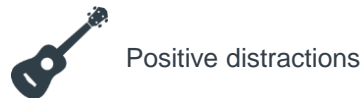
Ultimately, the goal for BH facilities is to incorporate the concept of healing design. The five core design characteristics we identified previously are all elements of healing design, and break down into those that are critical to safe operations and those that are essential for proper clinical treatment. Space flexibility and clear lines of sight are operationally important, as they are often necessary to manage BH patients, increase throughput, and ensure safety. Access to nature/natural light, calming interior design, and positive distractions are clinically important, because all three have therapeutic effects that can be crucial pieces of BH patient recovery. Ideally, all five characteristics would be present in a BH facility, but it is not always possible to use all of these in all facilities. However, having even one operational and one clinical design feature can go a long way towards accommodating BH patients and closing the gap between security and comfort.

## Design Characteristics Categorization

### Critical to Safe Operations



### Essential for Clinical Treatment



We've introduced a variety of BH facility models here, some of which you may be familiar with. Notably, all the successful facilities we've profiled here have the same philosophy at heart: to emphasize passive security and utilize design elements that promote patient healing. By adopting this ethos, your facility can maximize therapeutic benefits for the vulnerable, and growing, behavioral patient populations.





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