

Tippecanoe County faces critical shortages in mental health care

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Indiana ranks as one of the worst states in regards to mental health care access for its citizens.

According to a 2016 report issued by The Mental Healthcare Forum of Tippecanoe County, Indiana has one of the lowest ratio of psychiatrists to people at 5.2 psychiatrists per 10,000 people. The national average is 8.9.

Tippecanoe County and dozens of other Indiana counties have been designated mental health professional shortage areas. There are not enough mental health care providers to meet the local level of need.

The mental health care workforce totals roughly 109 providers short of adequate coverage. There are 220 providers in total, including psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse practitioners, psychiatric nurses, therapists and caseworkers.

The reasons behind this shortage are multifaceted and not limited to Indiana. The country in general is facing a shortage of mental health care providers, said Jennifer Flora, CEO of Mental Health America of Tippecanoe. Such a shortage can have a trickle-down effect.

Indiana also has some of the most stringent requirements in the country in terms of licensure for therapists and psychiatrists, Flora added. This acts as a deterrent for professionals to practice in state or migrate to Indiana to set up shop.

Finally, Flora said, there is the issue of poaching.

Because Indiana has highly qualified and licensed professionals, clinics in other states have been actively recruiting mental health care professionals from Indiana and Tippecanoe County specifically. Flora said there were several recent instances of professionals being headhunted by firms in Colorado.

"We know Colorado has been doing that. We've lost a few therapists from right here to Colorado. You know, we can't offer those mountains," Flora said.

Rebecca Sullivan, CEO of Willowstone Family Services, confirmed this trend, saying Willowstone has been struggling to keep up with the mental health care needs of the community. Last year she said there were almost 200 clients on the waiting list.

Mental health care providers are at a disadvantage amid a shortage. The services of providers are in high demand, allowing them to be selective in terms of location, salary and other benefits.

"There are other states that can offer higher pay than we do. That's because those states get higher reimbursement rates for their services," Sullivan said. "Providers here have the chance to move to another state where the pay is higher."

Willowstone recently hired two new providers, Sullivan said, but they got lucky. Clinics around town are constantly struggling to fill positions.

“It used to be that when we put an advertisement in the paper to hire a provider we would get dozens of resumes. Now we’re lucky if we get a couple,” Sullivan said.

It’s not all bad news, however, Flora said. The fact that Tippecanoe County is aware of and addressing this issue is a good first step. She said few other Indiana counties are actively engaged in stemming the shortage.

Flora added there are some rumblings that the state legislature might lessen the restrictions on mental health care providers this year, making it easier to practice in the state.

In the long term Flora thinks more students pursuing an education in mental health care locally could lead to a higher number of providers for the county.

“We’ve talked to Purdue (University) about starting a program for nurse practitioners where they could get a specialty license in behavioral health and write prescriptions,” Flora said.

While waiting for these measures to bear fruit, however, Flora said increased collaboration between providers and clinics can help identify and shore up glaring holes. Also, participation in less formal therapies like support groups can help as a stopgap measure for those unable to immediately receive treatment.

“Locally we can work with all of the clinics to bring more collaboration between mental health care providers. ... That will take the cooperation of all the larger mental health clinics and they seem to be on board. They want to make sure people are getting services,” Flora said.

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