

Community Partnerships: Improving Behavioral Health Access for Virginia's Youth

50% of all lifetime mental illness begin by age 14, and 75% appear by 24. Identifying and treating these illnesses early in life, typically before formal diagnosis, can change the trajectory of a person's health. To better meet the needs of their community Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters (CHKD) engaged in an initiative to transform pediatric mental health services through dedication and partnerships.

Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters (CHKD)

Young people are experiencing mental health emergencies at record rates, with one in five children aged 12-17 living with a serious mental health condition. Suicide is also a leading cause of death in people aged 15-19. The pandemic has only exacerbated this crisis, putting tremendous pressure on primary care pediatricians and emergency departments that serve children and adolescents. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 50% of all lifetime mental illness begin by age 14, and 75% appear by 24. Identifying and treating these illnesses early in life, typically before formal diagnosis, can change the trajectory of a person's health.

Mental health emergencies are especially challenging in areas with limited mental health resources. Norfolk, Virginia, home of Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters (CHKD), used to fit that description, but over the past five years, the hospital has engaged in an initiative to transform pediatric mental health services. This includes a new 60-bed pediatric mental health hospital that will open for inpatient care in October of 2022. The new facility, called Children's Pavilion, is the hub for the comprehensive continuum of pediatric mental health services that CHKD is building. The pediatric health system has also hired 19 child and adolescent psychiatrists, 10 psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners, and dozens of nurses, therapists and support staff needed to improve access to care.

To achieve this level of growth over a five-year period, CHKD built awareness and support from a wide range of stakeholders, including Board members and community leaders as well as the hospital's internal constituents of pediatricians and support staff members. Their actions are relevant and replicable for other communities faced with gaps to fill in mental health care.

Defining the problem

The region's need for additional pediatric mental health care first reached CHKD's attention through its Community Health Needs Assessment process. Surveys of the general public and health care stakeholders conducted in 2013, 2016 and 2019 identified mental health as the region's number one pediatric health care need. By 2015, CHKD was experiencing another symptom of the need for additional pediatric mental health services: sharp increases in the number of children presenting to its pediatric emergency room and its 20-practice network of primary care pediatric practices across the region with mental health needs.

Patients who came to CHKD's emergency room often needed inpatient care, but the hospital had no inpatient acute mental health beds, and facilities that did were often full. Some children spent days in CHKD's emergency department awaiting bed placement. Children with less severe issues faced similar challenges getting outpatient appointments, even after discharge from an inpatient stay. Clearly, the regional system of pediatric mental health care was inadequate and fractured.

Creating Solutions

In August of 2014 Stephanie Osler, CHKD director, Mental Health Services, and her colleagues sought out solutions geared toward integrating mental health care into the primary care setting. Integration of physical and behavioral health in primary care provides treatment for the whole person, rather than fragmenting care. For example, when clinicians treat children for the physical symptoms of an eating or substance use disorder, they also provide mental health care, improving outcomes and reducing the total cost of care. Clinicians also often teach coping skills that patients can apply outside of the hospital, reducing the risks of relapse and hopefully improving the chances of living in recovery.

As part of its integration efforts, the health system connected with the REACH program to educate and support pediatricians around behavioral health. The Virginia Mental Health Access Program later took the lead on this training.

Hospital leaders also in 2014 launched a practice comprised of six licensed clinical social workers in during this period to support children's physical and mental health conditions.

"The need far outpaced the number of therapists we had, and we started to expand our presence to support our pediatricians and our community," Osler said. "In 2017, a presentation to the board of our health system highlighting the pediatric mental health crisis and our need to do more was well-received. It was determined in early 2018 that our community need supported 60 acute mental health beds, at which point we started development of a brand-new mental health hospital."

To fully address patient needs (beyond or before a hospital stay), CHKD leaders prioritized a full continuum of care to support children in all phases of their mental health journeys.

Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters' leaders sought out funding and community buy-in through a targeted fundraising campaign, meeting with local business leaders, legislators, philanthropists and other community groups to share their mission.

"We knew we needed to do more, and our hospital and our community were there to support," Osler said. "At the time of this development we had one child and an adolescent psychiatrist on our team. Today, we have 19 and continue to recruit."

Hospital leaders later renovated two units in CHKD's main hospital building to boost its capacity and accessibility. Leaders debuted a new, seven bed Medical-Psychiatric Unit, and a Mental Health Emergency Services area. This area is adjacent to its main hospital emergency department, with six beds to further integrate physical and mental health.

Summary

Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters' leaders responded to the community's mental health crisis by taking a multifaceted and community-focused approach. They trained licensed clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, and licensed clinical psychologists to deliver a variety of evidence-based treatments designed for children and incorporated this care into the community through health centers and pediatric practices.

Today, CHKD's in house mental health team includes 19 child psychiatrists as well as 10 psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners, 15 psychologists, and nearly 50 therapists, supervisees, residents and medical social workers. In the summer of 2023, CHKD will debut a Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship to provide education and training to the next generation of mental health professionals. Current training programs include psychology, social work and counseling.

Next steps

Part of CHKD's overall mental health initiative included a 14-story mental health hospital on the same Norfolk campus as CHKD's main hospital. The building, named the Children's Pavilion, opened in April of 2022 as part of a phased rollout. The first 12 of 60 private inpatient beds were made available for child and adolescent acute mental health treatment and will also house a partial hospital program and mental health outpatient program.

"This program will provide a beacon of hope for children with mental health conditions, and we continue to focus on hope, health and healing for all children," Osler said.