Availability of Mental Health Professionals in Kent and Sussex Counties

Summary provided to Mental Health Task Force established by DE House Joint Resolution 7

Chaired by Lieutenant Governor Matt Denn

Prepared by Susan Cycyk, Director, Division of Prevention and Behavioral Health Services, with support from Herman Ellis, MD, Medical Director, Division of Public Health, and Melissa Smith, Deputy Director, Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, October 10, 2011.

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A geographic area is federally designated as a mental health professional shortage area based on population to practitioner ratios. Practitioners are separated into two categories: psychiatrists and core mental health professionals. Core mental health professionals include advanced practice nurses, mental health counselors, chemical dependency professionals, licensed clinical social workers, and psychologists.

Minimum population to practitioner ratios are:

a) Population to core mental health professional of 6,000 to 1 and population to psychiatrist of 20,000 to 1, or
b) Population to core mental health professional greater than or equal to 9,000 to 1, or
c) Population to psychiatrist ratio of 30,000 to 1.

For areas of unusually high need (based, for example, on history of substance abuse in the area, age of the population), minimum population to practitioner ratios are reduced to:

a) Population to core mental health professional of 4,500 to 1 and population to psychiatrist ratio of 15,000 to 1, or
b) Population to core professional ratio of 6,000 to 1, or
c) Population to psychiatrist ratio of 20,000 to 1.

A 2006 report provided to the Delaware Healthcare Commission by Advances in Management, Inc., The Supply and Demand for Mental Health Services in Delaware, indicated shortages of mental health professionals in southern New Castle County, northern Kent County (Odessa, Smyrna, Kenton) and Sussex County (Bridgeville-Greenwood, Georgetown, Laurel-Delmar, Millsboro, Seaford, Selbyville-Frankford). DSAMH/DHSS and DPBHS/DSCYF participated in this analysis, which resulted in DE's application to the federal government for these geographic areas to be classified as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA). Theory was that professionals who chose to work in these areas might be eligible for federal loan forgiveness, that J-1 work visas would be easier to obtain for non-citizens to work in these areas, and that DE would be generally better-positioned for potential future federal

investments intended to increase the availability of healthcare. DE was successful in achieving HPSA status for these areas.

In 2009 Tibor Toth, Ph.D., authored Mental Health Professionals in Delaware, 2009, through the Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research at the University of Delaware. This is the most recent analysis available, and it is the one that DPH/DHSS references in discussions on mental health professional shortages.

Based on Dr. Tibor's analysis, Sussex County is currently a health care professional shortage area. Current population to practitioner ratios follow:

Psychiatry ratio:

a) Kent County: 8,286 to one.
b) Sussex County: 27,431 to 1.

Core Mental Health Professional ratio:

a) Kent County: 2,315 to 1.
b) Sussex County: 2,802 to 1.

Opportunities to increase access include:

- In addition to the sheer numbers of practitioners, availability of care is affected by whether the practitioner will accept insurance. In Kent County, 85% of psychiatrists and 71.6% of core mental health professionals accept insurance. In Sussex County, 100% of psychiatrists and 69.2 % of core mental health professionals accept insurance. As parity for mental health care is implemented, conversations with practitioners and insurers could be helpful.
- Access to treatment is limited by time of day and day of week that treatment is available. Weekend and Saturday hours are preferred by families. Kent County mental health professionals offer more evening and Saturday appointments than those in Sussex County. Again, conversations with practitioners and insurers may prove fruitful.
- Education offers an opportunity to recruit. Most mental health professionals in our state graduated from high school in Delaware, or went to college either in Delaware or one of the surrounding states. Expansion of quality higher education programs may increase the workforce. Psychiatry is an exception to that trend. Over half the psychiatrists who practice in Delaware are not from our state. The DIMER program with Jefferson University offers opportunities. Expanding the use of J-1 visas may offer others.
- Evidence-based and promising practices are effective. They increase the satisfaction rate and treatment participation rate of children and families, resulting in better outcomes. Continued support for training to help professionals stay current in best practice, emerging practices, and treatment trends, such as that offered by the Division of Prevention and Behavioral Health Services and the Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, offers an opportunity.