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RECENT EVENTS

LVBCH 41ST ANNUAL CONFERENCE: INNOVATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH PANEL

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the need for well-integrated mental and physical health services and accelerated the use of digital platforms to provide mental health services, according to a panel of mental health experts who participated in the *Innovations in Mental Health* panel discussion during LVBCH's 41st Annual Conference on May 6. Peter Kareha, Employee Benefits Consultant & State EB Practice Leader, McGriff Insurance, moderated the discussion. Participating in the panel discussion were:

- John Bulger, DO, Chief Medical Officer, Geisinger Health Plan
- Kimberly Kabernagel, DO, Medical Director, Geisinger Marworth
- Dominick DiSalvo, MA, LPC, Corporate Director of Clinical Services, KidsPeace
- Sandra Kuhn, MSW, Behavioral Health Consulting Group Leader, Mercer

DiSalvo said digital mental health visits have provided an alternative for patients who were reluctant to go to a mental health clinic due to the fear that their neighbors or someone else they knew might see them. Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding mental health remains, making digital platforms attractive. In fact, KidsPeace has transitioned many of its in-person clinicians to digital clinicians. Digital visits improve access for people who live in the middle of the state, or middle of the country, and have to drive two to three hours just to see a provider.

Dr. Kabernagel said Geisinger Health has been working with its behavioral health department to integrate both mental health and the substance abuse services within the health care system. For example, case managers working in the emergency department identify patients in need and help to coordinate services. Meanwhile, the addition of telehealth has significantly reduced the number of people who fail to show up for their appointments. For Marworth substance abuse clinics, the show rate was 85%, which is phenomenal for behavioral health treatment. Unfortunately, however, the pandemic resulted in a record number of opioid-related deaths between September 2019 to 2020, reversing a decreasing trend. Contributing factors to the increase include fear of entering inpatient facilities, pandemic-related stress, and isolation.

Besides, digital visits, KidsPeace has been offering free walk-in assessments, which have been particularly beneficial for people experiencing acute anxiety. Walk-in clients can talk to someone and get help quickly. In addition, KidsPeace will soon embed licensed professional counselors in schools, DiSalvo said.

In regard to what employers can do, Kuhn suggested digital fireside chats, where leaders communicate with employees and talk about mental health services, such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and perhaps even say that they have used it themselves. Personal testimonials or stories of employees who have been helped successfully also reduce stigma, increasing the likelihood that employees will seek help.

60 West Broad St. • Suite 306 • Bethlehem, PA 18018 • P: 610-317-0130

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Dr. Bulger said it's important for employers to provide mental health tools such as those that allow them to screen themselves for depression or other mental health conditions. Let employees know that behavioral health issues are real, it's normal to have concerns in these areas and they need to be addressed. Also, mental health issues need to be addressed just like hypertension, diabetes or any other physical condition. There is a stigma surrounding mental health because we've held it under a basket for so long. The leaders of some organizations have powerful mental health related stories of their own that they are willing to share. Dr. Bulger said, this type of sharing shows employees, "We're all in this together."

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