
MODELS FOR PRACTICE

FOCUS AREA: MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL DISORDERS

Program Name: Pro Bono Counseling Program, Mental Health Association of the New River Valley, Inc.

Location: Blacksburg, Virginia

Problem Addressed: Access to Mental Health Services for the Uninsured

Healthy People 2010 Objective: 18

Web Address: <http://www.mhanrv.org>

SNAPSHOT

The Pro Bono Counseling Program is designed to provide mental health services to those who are low to moderate income, uninsured, and ineligible for Medicaid. Through partnerships with local mental health providers, the program provides free mental health services to eligible adults, children, and families. The program also provides free prescription services. Currently, the program serves 280 persons per year and provides nearly \$45,000 in free psychiatric medications. Each patient receives an average of seven units of counseling or medication-related services.

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THE MODEL

Blueprint: The Pro Bono Counseling Program provides mental health counseling and psychiatric services to low to moderate-income individuals up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). The program's clients are uninsured and/or ineligible for assistance programs such as Medicaid. It delivers free mental health services, short-term solution-focused counseling, and medication evaluations. The program currently partners with 35 mental health providers throughout the 1,400 square mile region, with nearly 40 percent of the mental health providers donating their time. To expand their pool of service providers, the program also partners with local universities. Unlicensed graduates of masters and Ph.D. programs in mental health related fields see four clients per week; the program pays a qualified supervisor to provide the required clinical supervision once a week. Services are delivered in the provider offices as well as during special clinic nights and at nonprofit locations such as libraries in the more rural areas.

Additionally, the program coordinates medication evaluations. While pharmaceutical companies provide free samples, the program also uses a voucher system to pay for medications when free samples are not available. The program also benefits from The Pharmacy Connection software, which expedites applications to pharmaceutical companies' indigent drug programs.

Making a Difference: To measure the program's effectiveness, an outcome and satisfaction survey is annually administered to randomly selected clients. All responding clients report they would refer a friend to the program. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest satisfaction rating), the program has received a rating of nine. Outcome measurement finds that nearly 60 percent of clients complete their treatment, and there is a no-show rate of only 10 percent. Severity of symptoms and difficulties in work life and personal life were cut in half.

Beginnings: The Pro Bono Counseling Program is a collaborative initiative of the New River Valley Partnership for Access to Healthcare (PATH). PATH is a community-focused alliance comprised of over 40 health and human services organizations, community organizations, and businesses. PATH was created to address the health concerns of the New River Health District, which consists of 1,400 square miles encompassing rural and suburban regions in southwest Virginia. A needs assessment conducted in 1996 revealed stress, anxiety, and depression occurred in 31 percent of the homes surveyed, prompting the need for increased access to mental health services.

The Mental Health Association of New River Valley serves as the coordinating agency for the Pro Bono Counseling Program. The program began with receipt of a four-year grant from a local hospital foundation. Using the grant money, the Pro Bono Counseling Program has grown and currently has three part-time paid staff who coordinate the clinical services provided by the volunteer and trainee providers.

Challenges and Solutions: One of the foremost challenges encountered by the Pro Bono Counseling Program is the pursuit of funding sources. While a local hospital foundation provided initial funding, the Pro Bono Counseling Program sought and received additional funding from a statewide health care foundation. In addition, the program faced challenges in recruiting mental health provider volunteers. By partnering with local universities, post-graduate, license-eligible trainees are utilized to provide direct services to clients and also gain valuable experience. Medicaid requirements in the state of Virginia require that state mental health agencies see only the priority population (defined as severe and emergency). Therefore, as fewer patients are seen by state agencies, more patients seek the services of the Pro Bono Counseling Program.

The majority of the program's clients are referred by word of mouth; however, the program does utilize a variety of other marketing tools to publicize their program. The program advertises through program brochures and ads in the newspaper. It recently initiated an anti-stigma campaign to address societal barriers to seeking mental health care.

The program has received a number of awards. It won the 2000 Innovation in Programming Award by the National Mental Health Association. It was also a semifinalist for the American Psychiatric Association's Golden Community Award and the Premier Cares Award.

Finally, to offer the opportunity for other areas of the country to replicate the program, the program offers a Program Development Guide, which includes a program handbook and all the forms and documents (including the original grant) needed for other sites to create their own Pro Bono Counseling Program. The guide may be purchased from the program.

PROGRAM CONTACT INFORMATION

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