GRANTWATCH

Foundation Support For Mental Health

In a short report released in February 2014, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) says that 18.2 percent of adult Americans (or 42.5 million people) experienced some sort of mental, behavioral, or emotional illness in the past year. Serious mental illness, meaning a condition causing “substantial functional impairment” that significantly interferes with or limits “one or more major life activities,” affected 4 percent of adult Americans during that time. SAMHSA provides block grants for states to help adults with mental illnesses, and the state-level data in this report are important to policy makers as they must allocate funding based on the needs of people in their communities.

According to Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS) data from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the cost for mental health services for US noninstitutionalized civilians of all ages (data do not include members of the armed forces) was $77.6 billion in 2011.

Some organizations focus on the impact of mental illness on specific populations, such as children. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) notes that “cognitive, affective, and behavioral disorders incur high psychosocial and economic costs for the young people who experience them, for their families, and for the communities in which they live, study, and will work.” In response, the IOM has established the Forum on Promoting Children’s Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Health, funded by the Annie E. Casey, Robert Wood Johnson, and William T. Grant Foundations; the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health; and others.

Service members are a population at particular risk. In three March 2014 JAMA Psychiatry articles, the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Service-members—funded by the US Army and the National Institute of Mental Health—released its first findings on suicide attempts and deaths in the Army. The study found that the increase in suicide deaths from 2004 to 2009 occurred even among soldiers who had never deployed. Also, almost half of the soldiers who reported attempting suicide had made a first try before enlistment, and “soldiers reported higher rates of certain mental disorders” than civilians have, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and substance use disorder, says a press release.

Here is just a small sample of foundations’ efforts to improve mental health around the United States.

Children

United Health Foundation, a national funder established by UnitedHealth Group, awarded a $2.9 million grant to the Washburn Center for Children, a community health center in Minneapolis focused on mental health for kids. The grant will support the center’s effort “to create an innovative, nationally renowned children’s mental health training program,” according to an October 2013 press release. This new training institute supported by the grant “aims to enhance clinical outcomes and reduce health care costs by increasing access to the most effective, evidence-based mental health services [and to] transform the training, practice and expertise of the children’s mental health workforce in Minnesota.” Washburn hopes that the institute will serve as a replicable national model.

Policy

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the nonpartisan Alliance for Health Reform cosponsored a July 2013 briefing titled “Shifting Challenges: Mental Health in the ACA Era.” The alliance’s website noted that because of both the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and mental health parity laws, access to mental health care would be available to millions more Americans through private insurance and Medicaid.

After exploratory discussions with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services and other stakeholders, including consumers and mental health providers, the Maine Health Access Foundation awarded five planning grants in March 2013 to community mental health centers aiming to become behavioral health homes that integrate behavioral (mental health, substance abuse, or both) and primary care for people with serious mental illnesses. Subsequent health home implementation grants will be awarded in spring 2014.

Research shows that people with serious mental illnesses die “twenty-five years sooner on average than their peers” do, usually because of “chronic, physical health conditions that too often go untreated,” explains foundation president and CEO Wendy Wolf. Since 2006 the foundation has supported integrated care under its promoting patient-centered care strategic priority.

Following a feasibility study that included survey input from more than 1,500 stakeholders across Texas, including people who had received mental health or substance use care, elected officials, advocates, university faculty and staff, and Meadows Foundation grantees, the foundation planned to launch the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute for Texas in April 2014. According to this statewide funder’s website, it will commit $10 million for the institute, which “will provide high-quality, nonpartisan and objective policy research and development to improve mental health services” in the Lone Star State. When respondents were asked to select how important various factors would be to the institute’s effectiveness, addressing both mental health and alcohol and drug problems together was the factor that ranked highest, said a survey summary. This view aligns “with current recognition that these problems cannot be addressed in isolation.”

Helping state and local government leaders “better understand the real value of
mental health care” was chosen by the highest percentage of respondents (68 percent) as “one of the most important” overall issues facing the state. Helping the general public better understand the value of mental health care was chosen as one of the most important by 60 percent, and determining “how mental health care can improve health outcomes and reduce costs” was selected by 51 percent.

In July 2013 the van Ameringen Foundation awarded a $100,000 grant to the Community Health Law Project in South Orange, New Jersey, to implement its Special Navigator Project. This project is helping the mentally ill and people with co-occurring mental illness and substance use problems to enroll in health insurance under the ACA. (The foundation, located in New York City, funds in metropolitan New York and Philadelphia.)

Publications


The California HealthCare Foundation published Mental Health Care in California: Painting a Picture, a July 2013 report that was chockfull of the most recent data then available (2009 and 2010) and included two time lines of mental health policy in the state. Finally, the RWJF published a March 2013 issue brief titled “How Can Early Treatment of Serious Mental Illness Improve Lives and Save Money?”

Stigma

Sierra Health Foundation, the California Endowment, and Blue Shield of California Foundation together awarded $175,000 to the Sacramento County (California) Office of Education to implement a community action plan focusing on mental health, said a March 2014 press release. The plan was developed as a result of the city’s participation in the National Dialogue on Mental Health, a nationwide effort initiated by President Barack Obama to create community solutions to mental illness. The education office will work in partnership with Mental Health America of Northern California to implement the plan, which aims to “combat stigmas, educate communities and increase access to mental health treatment” with a focus on youth. Chet Hewitt, Sierra Health’s president and CEO, noted in the release that “according to recent statistics, one in 13 California children suffers from a mental illness” limiting participation in daily activities, and “two-thirds of adolescents with mental health needs do not get treatment.” The California Wellness Foundation and the three other funders supported planning and delivery of the National Dialogue event and development of the plan. The Center for Health Program Management, founded by Sierra Health, manages this project.

Paso Del Norte Health Foundation, in El Paso, Texas, recently launched its think.change initiative, which aims to improve mental and emotional well-being and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness in the foundation’s funding region (two counties in West Texas, three counties in New Mexico, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico). Thus far, the foundation has awarded six grants totaling more than $1.2 million “to increase availability of well researched evidence-based programs,” said a December 2013 press release. The initiative includes a strategy to train health providers in effective communication techniques and cultural competency in this US-Mexico border area. Among the first grantees is the Texas A&M Foundation Colonias Program, which will train up to forty-eight community health workers and 630 women in colonias (poor, border neighborhoods often lacking basic living necessities) in two counties to understand and address anxiety and depression. The University of Texas, El Paso, is providing technical support for the program.

Veterans

In December 2013 the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) launched a program to provide education and support to families, friends, and partners of those in the military and veterans who have been affected by major mental health conditions. The Bristol Myers-Squibb, Cigna, and Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundations are among the funders of the NAMI Homefront program. Initially, NAMI is implementing the program in six states. Participants go through a free course of six peer-led sessions—the trained teachers are family of military members or veterans with mental illness. In the program’s second phase, NAMI will offer a free online option to people nationwide. When one person in a family is living with a mental health condition, the entire family is affected, particularly those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), NAMI’s then–executive director, Michael Fitzpatrick, commented in a press release.

Key Personnel Change

JUDY BELK became the new president and CEO of the California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) in April 2014. Previously, Belk was senior vice president of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, a position she had held since 2002. Before that, Belk was vice president of global public affairs at Levi Strauss & Co., “with responsibilities for both the company’s and [its] foundation’s leadership in the global fight against AIDS” and for other initiatives, according to a February 2014 press release.

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