

Should mental health funds go toward current needs or future growth?



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J. William Gardam is president and chief executive officer of Peace River Center, a community behavioral health agency that provides services in Polk County. — SCOTT WHEELER / THE LEDGER

By **Marilyn Meyer**

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Florida consistently falls at or near the bottom of rankings that look at the availability of mental health services, and Polk County fares poorly among its counties.

It's not that problems are unrecognized — there are people who have been slugging away for decades to improve behavioral health services, finagling for funds, tweaking budgets and experimenting with programs. But the problems are expected to compound as the county is expecting a population boom — growing from the current 630,000 to 1 million people by 2040.

Local leaders in the mental health services field see some forward movement with newer funding sources to tap and with the growth of telehealth, technology that allows counselors to work with some clients via smart phones.

But still, “Florida is 49th now in per capita spending for mental health services and if we do not have the necessary resources, we will be 49th in 20 years,” said Robert Rihn, a licensed clinical social worker who is chief executive officer of Tri-County Human Services. Tri-County provides substance abuse and behavioral health services in Polk, Highlands and Hardee counties, much of it through government contracts.

Rihn said funding streams to serve lower-income clients have remained pretty much steady over the last couple of decades and much of it is directed toward providing crisis services.

“As we continue to deal with crisis-level mental health and substance abuse issues, we will continue to drain funds for people not at crisis level,” Rihn said. “When we do that, we continue to not address issues until they reach a crisis level.”

Doing the math

J. William Gardam, president and CEO of Peace River Center — which has 27 locations, 19 in Polk County — also sees the complexity of reaching current needs before tackling future needs.

Gardam quickly calculates: “If we are talking about 39 percent population increase by 2040 that is about 250,000 people. Aside from where are they going to live, you wonder what that means for patient access and for health services meeting needs. Roughly 25 percent of the population is affected by mental health issues or substance abuse in a year — that’s 62,000 more people.

“Typically, 40 percent of those affected by mental illness will actually seek treatment. That would be 25,000 more people. And if we are able to continue to reduce the stigma of mental illness, let’s take that number up to an estimated 32,000 more people seeking care for mental illness by 2040,” Gardam said.

Preventing crises

Lance Anastasio, retired CEO of Winter Haven Hospital and chairman of Polk County’s Citizens Oversight Committee of the half-cent sales tax for indigent health care, cited an example of a new program aimed at reducing the number of mentally ill people cycling in and out of emergency treatment and jails.

This year, the county allocated \$1.2 million to a program that will continue services for mentally ill inmates after they are released from jail. Off-duty paramedics will deliver medications and work with them for six to eight weeks until they are enrolled as continuing care clients of a program operated by Winter Haven Hospital Center for Behavioral Health.

But Peace River Center failed to get its requested \$1.2 million for a program to provide around-the clock behavioral health and supportive services for young

children and their families, drawing the ire of the Polk Ecumenical Action Council for Empowerment (PEACE), an 18-church alliance. PEACE has been lobbying county officials for several years to fund services for severely mentally ill children and adults with around-the-clock intensive therapy and support.

Extending reach

Seventy-five percent of psychotropic drugs are now prescribed by family doctors, often without follow-up mental health counseling, Gardam said. For the last several years both Peace River and Tri-County have been working with agencies and physician offices that operate primary care clinics to embed counseling services, he said.

“If we can expand services without having to build or rent space, that’s a huge savings,” Gardam said.

“It also helps with stigma. If I can go to my family doctor and no one knows I am getting mental health services, then it starts to become OK,” Gardam said. “It is part of the medical clinic.”

Future needs

Any way you cut it, Florida is under-funded when it comes to behavior health services, said Larry Allen, chief operating officer of the Central Florida Behavioral Health Network, a nonprofit that contracts with the state to disburse Department of Children and Family funds.

Mental health services funding is complicated said Doris Nardelli, the network’s director of communications. Other state, federal and local agencies have separate funding streams for behavioral health services. But none has sufficient funding to meet current needs.

A Behavioral Health Network’s assessment of top needs for mental health and substance abuse services in Circuit 10, which includes Polk County, identified the top need was safe and secure housing that is affordable, Allen said.

“That includes additional beds for longer term treatment to help stabilize people, as well as the availability of affordable supported housing to help keep people in the housing,” Allen said.

Ann Barnhart, chief executive officer of Heart of Florida Regional Medical

Center in Haines City, said the mental health system lost balance in its move away from inpatient to outpatient treatment.

“We need to regain balance for inpatient care when there is a need for acute psychiatric services,” Barnhart said.

Lake Wales Medical Center — a sister hospital in the for-profit Community Health System chain — opened an 18-bed unit dedicated to serving geriatric patients with both medical and mental health issues and Heart of Florida is preparing to open a 24-bed adult inpatient psychiatric unit, increasing the pool of inpatient beds available in the county.

In the meantime, in Polk County and across the nation, jail and prison continue to be the single largest providers of mental health services.

“We have translated this from being a mental health issue into being a criminal justice issue,” Allen said.

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