

Providing Care For the Acute Mentally Ill: A Community Response

Hospital emergency departments nationwide are suffering from insufficient resources, increasing numbers of uninsured and underinsured patients, and a surge in the number of patients with mental illness, but San Antonio roundtable leaders have made changes to relieve some of the stress.

Now, thanks to the development of a 24-hour comprehensive acute mental health clinic, patients who are a danger to themselves or others and who need to be involuntarily committed to psychiatric care will no longer be taken first to the closest hospital emergency department to determine whether they have medical issues needing treatment. Instead, a medical screening will be completed at a new facility called the Crisis Care Center.

Also new is the Center for Health Care Service's implementation of a jail diversion program designed to reduce the number of people who end up in jail due to behavioral problems caused in part by mental illness. The program directly addresses the unhappy expectation nationwide that hospital emergency departments are likely to remain the primary destination and holding tank for psychiatric patients in the near future.

Efforts to create the jail diversion program here involved working with the sheriff's office and training officers to deal with people who suffer severe mental illness. With officers trained to recognize and deal with people acting inappropriately as a result of mental illness, CHCS hopes to direct consumers to more appropriate treatment options than the jail or an ED psychiatric unit.

The Crisis Care Center is located at 527 N. Leona, once the Robert B. Green



Hospital and now the University Health Center Downtown. With a \$240,000 infusion of money from the San Antonio Police Department, Bexar County Sheriff's Office, and the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District, community leaders have transformed a portion of that space into a comprehensive mental health clinic.

Medical vs. Mental

Mental health crises are often coupled with medical problems and conversely medical problems often have a mental health issue at the root. People who find themselves entangled in the criminal justice system are more often than not experiencing mental and/or medical problems that have been neglected over a lifetime. It should come as no surprise that law enforcement officers and healthcare facilities are often called on as the first responders for people in crisis who are also committing crimes.

There has not been an adequate means to address and care for the needs of this special population until now.

By relocating acute mental health

services from 711 E. Josephine to the UHS downtown clinic, we can provide comprehensive medical and mental health screening at one location. In addition to providing medical screening for psychiatric patients and substance abuse service providers, the Crisis Care Center also will provide medical care for persons under arrest by local law enforcement agencies, public inebriates, and other detainees of the municipal court's city detention facility.

Assessing Need

The CHCS is the operating authority for the Crisis Care Center. This innovative program is formally endorsed by Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff; Chief Albert Ortiz of the San Antonio Police Department; Fernando Guerra, MD, MPH, director the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District; Quentin Porter, director of municipal courts; and the Greater San Antonio Hospital Council.

Currently, only a small segment of the Bexar County population qualifies for state-sponsored mental health serv-

ices. Both outpatient and inpatient mental health services are extremely limited, and the burden of caring for patients with these issues often falls on the local EDs, primarily CHCS and University Hospital as the two largest providers of mental health services in the San Antonio area.

CHCS, the community's mental health and mental retardation authority, was established under the Texas Health and Safety Code. It is funded primarily through general revenue from DSIC. In addition to state funds, services for the indigent are supported through funds from University Health System and a limited number of grants.

CHCS primarily services Medicaid patients and operates three clinics for adults, one clinic for adults and children, and one clinic for children. Services are delivered by internal and external providers and include a screening by a licensed mental health professional, intake and assessment, and referrals to a variety of services at multiple locations throughout the community.

Filling the Gaps

A group called the Community Medical Directors Roundtable* developed out of initial discussions regarding emergency detention orders, crisis intervention training, and jail diversion. In order to address the gaps in coverage and healthcare access for the uninsured and underserved mental health population, health systems, safety net providers, and public officials must continue to work together. This type of collaboration remains one of the few available means for addressing the deteriorating mental health system.

The first order of business for the roundtable was to decompress EDs by finding an alternative site for mental health patients. Recent collaborative efforts by the major stakeholders (mental health advocates, emergency department administrators, public health officials, and law enforcement agencies) in the San Antonio healthcare community have resulted in improved coordination of acute psychiatric services. These community leaders, along with the Center for Health Care Services and University

Health System, developed the Crisis Care Center.

*Roundtable leaders who attended over the past two years included:

David Hnatow, MD, medical director, University Hospital Emergency Center

Sally Taylor, MD, medical director, University Hospital Psychiatric Emergency Service

John Sparks, MD, medical director, Detentional Health Care Services

John Rasch, MD, medical director, San Antonio State Hospital

Rodolfo Urby, MD, medical director, Community Medicine Associates

Fernando Guerra, MD, MPH, director, San Antonio Metropolitan Health District

Pedro Ruggero, MD, medical director, CHCS

Miguel Ramirez, MD, medical director, Crisis Care Center

Roberto Jimenez, MD, chairman, UHS Board of Managers

George Hernandez, president/CEO, UHS

Steve Enders, senior vice president for Ambulatory Services, UHS

Greg Rufe, hospital administrator, UHS

Nancy Ray, chief nursing officer, UHS

Leon Evans, executive director, CHCS

Carol Houston, EdD, former director, CHCS BHO

Sam Bowker, chief financial officer, CHCS

Roger Morin, community liaison, CHCS

Gilbert Gonzales, director of jail diversion and crisis services, CHCS

Charlie Boone, chief operations director, CHCS

Mary Bohne, director of clinical operations, CHCS

Joseph Perreta, CHCS

Rufus Hoefler, consultant, CHCS

Allan Cross, former director, Crisis Services, CHCS

The Hon. Polly Jackson Spencer, Probate Court Number 1

Harry Griffin, captain, SAPD

John Saucedo, captain, SAPD

Teri Neal, lieutenant, SAPD

John Riojas, SAPD

John Conte, SAPD

Dennis McKnight, deputy chief, Bexar County Sheriff's Office

Susan Garcia, court manager, City of San Antonio

Jim Hunt, vice president of behavioral health, Methodist Health System

Liza Jensen, director of behavioral health, Methodist Health System

Linda Hook, director of nursing, SAMHD ☐



Dr. Hnatow is chief of the Division of Emergency Medicine/South Texas Poison Center for UTHSCSA, chief of staff for University Health System, and medical director for University Hospital Emergency Center.

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