



Status of Mental Health in Our Community

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Good day, Mr. Chairman, the Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, members of the committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services, and the listening audience. I am Paulette Venzen-Potter, the Operations Manager and Clinical Social Worker for the Behavioral Health Program at St. Thomas East End Medical Center Corporation (STEEMCC).

I begin my testimony today by expressing my sincere gratitude for this opportunity to appear before this auspicious body to discuss the Behavioral Health Program at STEEMCC and to highlight the need for greater emphasis on mental health and mental wellness. I have worked at St. Thomas East End Medical Center for approximately six years, first as a case manager and now as a clinical social worker and operations manager.

It is not unusual in today's world to turn on the TV or radio and hear people discussing the topic of mental health and its impact on the lives of individuals and communities. While the stigma remains, our awareness is shifting, and mental health is coming out of the shadows. However, there are still too many of us who view mental health the same way our parents did, as something to be ashamed of or ignored.

Today, nearly 1 billion people live with a mental health disorder. Every year, close to 3 million people (about the population of Arkansas) die due to substance abuse. Every 40 seconds, a person dies by suicide. About 50% of mental health disorders start by the age of 14.

The STEEMCC Behavioral Health Team is mindful of the needs of our community and the necessity to improve access to behavioral health care and wellness throughout the territory. Our team is anchored in Recovery and Resiliency. At STEEMCC we address mental health from a holistic approach focused on prevention, policy changes, health and healing, wellness, and well-being.

STATUS OF THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAM:

Types of Services

Currently, the Behavioral Health team consists of two licensed clinical social workers. We offer a multicultural, trauma-focused approach to therapy that prioritizes understanding and respecting everyone's unique cultural background. Our specialized team is trained to address trauma effectively, providing compassionate care and tailored support to help people heal and thrive.

Our services include individual therapy, group therapy, family therapy, couple therapy, support groups, psychoeducation/presentations, and case management/referrals. We treat various diagnoses, including depression, anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia, and PTSD.

Currently, we are running a weekly women's support group at the center and a skill-building group with the residents at Yellow Cedar Residential Facility. Both groups are open-ended, and members may join at any time.



Number of Patients Receiving Services

For the 2023 calendar year, Behavioral Health providers saw 2,306 patients. However, psychiatric services were discontinued after the first three months due to the departure of our psychiatrist.

For the first four months of the 2024 calendar year, Behavioral Health providers, specifically, 2 licensed clinical social workers, saw 162 patients, resulting in 737 visits.

Our group sessions began in January of 2024 and is scheduled to meet weekly. Our Women's group includes a total of 15 women and our skill-building group a total of 12.

Most of our patients, not including groups, are seen bi-monthly. However, many of our patients receive weekly support because of their mental health challenges.

CURRENT NEEDS OF THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROGRAM

Let me preface this part of my presentation by saying that more funding is necessary for the Behavioral Health Program to meet the needs of those we serve.

Staffing

- Executive Assistant- This individual will assist with running the day-to-day operations and executive duties. Currently with only two therapists most of my time is spent seeing patients.
- Psych Nurse Practitioner- This individual will provide medication and counseling therapy. The psych nurse practitioner collaborates with the psychiatrists and the psychiatrist serves as a consultant. This approach saves money but still provides optimum patient care.
- Psychologist- This individual will be able to provide various assessments and psychological testing which can assist the Department of Education with their needs for more psychological services.
- Behavioral Health Therapist- This individual will provide more counseling services.

Space

As we build out the Behavioral Health Program more space will be needed to accommodate

- New hires
- Student interns
- Play therapy room
- Group Therapy room. The space that we are currently using for groups has been donated to us by the owner of Tutu Park Mall but at any time that space may be rented. I would like to publicly thank Ms. Lilibeth Foster for her generosity in allowing us to use that space.



Telehealth Video Capability

Currently, our telehealth services are provided over the phone. Video capability will help the therapeutic relationship, give patients options, and decrease no-shows.

Training

Funds for Training: Mental health is a dynamic field, meaning best practices change over time. This is why most mental health professionals are required to regularly earn continuing education credits. Our clients deserve clinicians updated on new developments to ensure the best care possible.

Grant Writer/Grant Manager

This individual will be responsible for writing and managing grants to help increase our funding sources.

I think it is worth repeating that more funding is the only way that we can build our Behavioral Health Program and help our patients.

FUTURE GOALS:

Expand Outreach Efforts

The present goal is to provide group therapy to schools in the St. Thomas/St. John district at the school sites. Students who may need individual therapy are currently expected to come to the center to receive this service. In the future, we would like to provide both individual and group therapy at the school during the school day. This will help to eliminate the barrier to care. This can only be possible with more staff, which requires more funding.

We have started collaborating with other residential facilities to provide behavioral health services on-site.

Increase Student Supervision

STEEMCC is committed to supporting individuals in the Behavioral Health field to help ensure the availability of qualified providers. One of our goals is to collaborate with the Department of Education and the University of the Virgin Islands to promote professional career options in the behavioral health field. Currently our achievements in this area have been hampered by the limited number of staff.

My final thoughts:

I think we can all agree that mental health is a serious concern. We all have stories that we can share about how an unaddressed mental health condition led to devastating results. So, the question is not, do we have a problem, but rather what are we doing to improve our mental health crisis?



Most of the patients we see at STEEMCC have Medicare, Medicaid, or are uninsured/self-pay. STEEMCC utilizes a sliding fee-scale for payment, however many patients, including students have been denied care due to their inability to take advantage of our sliding scale.

Mental Health is like no other disease because of the shame it bears. Parker S. Huntington wrote, “I wish I had cancer. Or some other grand battle. Dementia, stroke, organ failure. If I lose those fights, I’m brave. But the thing I’m battling with is my mind. And if I lose, they’ll just call me weak.”

So, I implore the honorable members of this esteemed branch of government, businesses in the community and all citizens in general to remember that Mental Health wellness is worth the investment. We must educate ourselves, allocate financial resources and invest the time to ensure that collectively we are doing our best to preserve mental health wellness in our community. Thank you for lending me your ears. I am available to respond to questions regarding my testimony.