



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 14, 2021

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Behavioral Health

Coronavirus is not the only public health crisis we have faced since 2020 began.

(Dixon, IL)

COVID-19 is arguably the biggest public health crisis we have faced in our lifetimes. But there's more to this crisis than merely dealing with a novel virus for which we initially had no defenses. That is **the parallel crisis in behavioral health** and how it has impacted individuals in treatment and the industry itself.

Numerous studies over the years point out that 1 in 5 adults, or 20%, experience a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year and that more than half go untreated for various reasons-most often lack of coverage or funding. According to insurer Blue Cross Blue Shield and based on 2019 data, there are more than 200 million missed workdays due to mental health conditions each year, and during COVID that only has increased. That's roughly \$16.8 billion in lost productivity in a "normal" non-pandemic year. Imagine the numbers for 2020 and for this year.

Before the pandemic, the country was already in the midst of several major behavioral health crises which arguably worsened significantly in the last 12+ months. Between 1999 and 2018, roughly 700,000 Americans died of drug overdoses, the majority, 450,000, were opioid overdoses. During that same period more than 700,000 Americans died from suicide.

During the pandemic mitigation measures intended to "flatten the curve" and "stop the spread", like stay-at-home orders and social distancing, have created other consequences and contributed to a spike in adverse behavioral health effects. In a study from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) 41% of adults reported at least one adverse behavioral health condition as a result of the stress brought on by the pandemic and the mitigation measures put in place. Like their counterparts in medical clinics and in hospitals, behavioral healthcare providers have stood in that gap and done the best they could under difficult conditions to continue to provide care to an increasing population of people who need their services.

However, the news isn't all bad. It is said even among the darkest clouds there can be silver linings, and this is true of behavioral health and COVID-19. Two things have come out of this pandemic: Awareness by all of us about our own mental wellness and awareness of the role treatment professionals play in behavioral health.

"I think there are some rays of light that have come out of this dark time," says Patrick Phelan, Sinnissippi Centers' President/CEO. "I think everyone has realized how important their own mental wellness is, how it is key to overall wellness, and how it's vital to do things to maintain a good level of mental wellness," adds Phelan. "Take stress and anxiety: We have all experienced heightened levels of stress and anxiety on many occasions during the past many months, and

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we have learned creative ways to deal with it,” says Phelan. “I think we all have also learned the role organizations like Sinnissippi Centers play during a crisis, but also in everyday situations,” says Phelan. “People are aware that during this time there’s have been an increase in people in crisis, suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, substance use, and a number of behavioral health issues and how vital good treatment and support is for those individuals,” adds Phelan. “I think people are more aware now that mental illnesses and substance use disorders are real diseases on par with any other chronic illness and that they need symptom management, support, and other adaptations to have as high a quality of life as possible living with a life-long affliction.”

“So, I think this is a key time that we have this heightened awareness about mental wellness, but I think people also realize that there’s a need for more funding for behavioral health and there’s an awareness that the need is much greater than the current levels of funding can meet,” adds Phelan. “I urge everyone to advocate with our state and federal lawmakers for better funding of the mental health and substance use treatment system to serve all who need those services,” says Phelan.

“The moral of the story is that we need those increased investments in behavioral health long-term because the effects of the pandemic aren’t just short term,” says Phelan, “we will see ripples from this for years to come. The impacts will be felt by our children at home and in school, in individuals of all ages through increased unemployment or underemployment, through financial impacts, and through things like increased domestic violence, sexual assault and sexual abuse, an uptick in crime, and many other negative things that have increased during the pandemic,” adds Phelan.

“Not only do we need investment in treatment dollars to fund services,” says Phelan, “but we really also need investments in infrastructure that support individuals going into the behavioral health field who will make it a life-long career,” says Phelan. “It’s a real problem right now because we have serious work-force challenges, we need to provide for better salaries especially in our rural areas to compete with larger providers and to compete with better paying industries, we need student loan forgiveness and tuition waivers to make a dent in the ever-increasing cost of education,” says Phelan. “We have seen our funders require more education from our providers, which is a good thing, but also creates a problem with the expense of an education vs. the expected compensation in our industry,” adds Phelan. “If we don’t make these investments now, we will see even greater need in the future and much bigger challenges trying to meet that need.”

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