

HEALTH CARE

Spending on mental illness sees a sudden boost

With mentally ill patients diverted to emergency rooms, local groups decide to act.

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Elizabeth Pelayo spent her days crying and withdrawn, refusing to open her door or answer the telephone.

The normally gregarious single mother, 35, was deeply depressed. But she said counseling through a local nonprofit, Any Baby Can, pulled her out of the fog.

"My life changed dramatically" said Pelayo, who lives in North Austin. "It just taught me to overcome my situation and showed me what to do with it."

Across Austin and in other parts of Texas, foundations and government organizations are giving more money to programs that help people with mental illnesses — an area that advocates say has long been underfunded in Texas.

The Travis County Healthcare District recently budgeted \$3.2 million to pay for more in-patient care at local psychiatric hospitals, up from \$1.9 million in 2007. St. David's Community Health Foundation last month awarded \$2.3 million in grants to local nonprofit groups working on mental health issues, up from \$1.3 million the year before.

In May, the Department of State Health Services handed out \$25 million in new money to 17 local mental health centers, including more than \$4.6 million for crisis care in Austin. The funding is part of \$82 million the Legislature approved in 2007 to stem the tide of people with mental illness flooding emergency rooms, psychiatric hospitals and jails.

That state-sanctioned financial support was widely seen as a victory in Texas, which is ranked 47th in the country for its per capita spending on people with mental illnesses. It's unclear whether the extra spending will continue, though.

"It's hard to tell whether or not it's a turning point, but a lot of eyes are on this," said Mike Maples, director of mental health and substance abuse programs for the Department of State Health Services.

Mental health advocates have long tried to push psychiatric issues into the spotlight.

Those efforts have received a boost from media coverage of mental health problems facing Iraq war veterans. State and national lawmakers are debating ways to improve mental health care for veterans. And this week, the U.S. House passed a bill, requiring group health plans to provide the same level of coverage for mental illnesses that is given to other health problems.

On the state and local level, crisis appears to be a driving force in the new spending.

Last fall, in an effort to stay within its state-allocated budget, the Austin-Travis County Mental Health Mental Retardation Center cut the number of patients it sent to Austin State Hospital. At that time, the center usually housed 100 to 110 patients at the hospital at any given time. Since then, the number has fluctuated: at one point in January, 56 Travis County patients were in the state hospital; this week there were 75.

With private mental health hospitals often full and unable to fill the void, dozens of suicidal, manic or violent people — insured and uninsured — have been diverted to area emergency rooms, where they might wait hours or even days to be sent to a local psychiatric hospital.

Local hospitals have responded by devoting more resources on the crisis patients.

The Seton Family of Hospitals, for example, added 16 beds at Seton Shoal Creek psychiatric hospital. It also set aside six beds at the University Medical Center at Brackenridge emergency room for people with mental and physical health problems — a move that cost about \$460,000 during the fiscal year that ended July 1. Seton also said it would double its \$3 million a year psychiatric residency program, adding four more residents to the program.

"You can't deal with community health problems if you're not also taking care of mental health issues," said Greg Hartman, senior vice president of University Medical Center at Brackenridge. "There's too much of a connection."

The hospital bed shortage also spurred officials with the Travis County Healthcare District to increase mental health funding.

"I think (the bed shortage) was the catalyst for saying to ourselves, We've got to do something," said Patricia Young Brown, president of the healthcare district. "There has to be a better way."

The district increased its contribution to the local mental health effort by agreeing to finance inpatient care over the next year that could help 368 to 728 additional indigent patients, depending on their length of stay in the hospital. Officials said they plan to continue that level of financing indefinitely.

Although the St. David's foundation also provided funding for in-patient psychiatric beds, most of its recent grants support local nonprofits. Waterloo Counseling, for example, will receive \$112,000 for mental health employees, including counselors. Any Baby Can was given \$149,00 to provide in-home counseling to 85 additional clients each year.

"It was really clear there was a lot of need, a big gap in mental health services," he foundation's president Dick Moeller said.

Pelayo received counseling from Any Baby Can after several years of dealing with her now 5-year-old son's attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. As a toddler, he threw tantrums, kicked, bit and screamed. He was ejected from several day care centers.

Pelayo said she was overwhelmed. Counseling helped her focus on solutions to her problems, she said.

"The counseling helped me believe in myself again," she said.

Without it, she said, "I probably would be stuck in the same rut, crying every day, taking every situation personally."

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