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A landmark report by the Surgeon General (1999, p.6) referred to mental health as “the successful performance of mental functions in terms of thought, mood, and behavior.” When those functions are compromised a person is considered to experience mental illness. Mental health and mental illness exist on a continuum, with a wide variety of classification (examples include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder), duration (short to long-term), and severity (mild to severe). In 2004, it was estimated that 26% of the United States population experienced some degree of mental illness during the 12 month period examined. Of those people, 37% of cases were considered mild, 35.5% were moderate, and 22% were severe (Texas Health Institute, 2007). Mental health issues currently represent the leading cause of disability for Americans aged 15-44 (National Institute of Mental Health, 2008).

Causes of mental health issues

Mental health issues occur due to biological, environmental, and psychological triggers. Biological factors include genetics, infections, brain defects, and prenatal damage. Environmental factors typically include nutritional issues and environmental toxins (WebMD, 2007). Psychologically, “traumatic experiences (such as disasters, neglect, bullying, and physical and sexual abuse) are the underlying cause or a contributor in many cases of mental illness and substance abuse” (Texas Health Institute, 2007, p.3). Several research studies reported that 34-53% of people diagnosed with severe mental illness also

reported childhood physical or sexual abuse (Missouri Institute of Mental Health, 2002).

Treatment of mental health issues

A major treatment for mental illness is counseling. According to the American Mental Health Counselors Association (2004), the scope of services provided by mental health counselors includes:

- Assessment and diagnosis
- Psychotherapy
- Treatment planning and review
- Brief and solution-focused therapy
- Substance abuse treatment
- Education and prevention programs
- Crisis interventions

Professionals in the mental health field (counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and therapists) receive licenses, certifications, and/or degrees to provide mental health counseling services. Mental health professionals often treat a spectrum of issues using a variety of treatments, but many also choose to specialize in fields such as loss, substance abuse, school and community issues, marriage and family issues, children’s issues, and geriatric therapy.

The National Institute of Mental Health reported in 2004 that “the treatment success rates for such disorders as depression (more than 80 percent), panic disorder (70-90 percent) and schizophrenia (60 percent), surpass those of other medical conditions, such as heart disease (45-50 percent)” (National Mental Health Association, n.d.).

Access to mental health care

Research indicates that the availability, utilization, and quality of mental health services in the United States are particularly disproportionate among minority and low-income people due to issues such as inadequate or no insurance, social stigma, lack of or incorrect diagnosis by medical professionals, and limited access to care (Atdjian & Vega, 2005; Felland, Felt-Lisk, & McHugh, 2004). “Uninsured adults were found to have significantly worse access to substance abuse and mental health services than Medicaid and privately insured patients” (Cook et al., 2007).

Low-income urban minority children in particular are at a greater risk of developing mental health issues due to their exposure to community crime, violence, drugs, and poor housing conditions, yet they are less likely to receive and continue with the mental health treatments they need (González, 2005; Snowden, Masland, Libby, Wallace, & Fawley, 2008). One study cited by Gonzalez (2005) found 50-75% of urban low-income youth did not receive needed mental health care. In a report from 2003, only 20% of Bexar county children eligible for state mental health services (2,023 children) were actually served (Mental Health Association in Texas, 2003).

The United States is also experiencing an especially large demand for mental health crisis care. The Department of State Health Services estimates that 54,255 people require crisis services in Texas each year, of which 7,708 are children (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2006). One study in California (Snowden et al., 2008) reported that minority children who accessed care for mental health crises were more likely to utilize emergency rooms as their primary source of care than their white counterparts, creating a drain on the medical system.

With an immense range of needs for mental health counseling, a tiered system of therapy and support services currently exists in Texas. The Department of State Health Services (formerly known as the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation) oversees all mental health services in the state of Texas,

runs the state hospitals, and contracts with providers for community-based services. Community-based organizations provided an estimated 65% of all mental health services in 2004, up from 35% in 1989 (Agency for Quality Healthcare Research and Quality, 2004).

The Texas Mental Health Care System

State Hospitals:

Serving the most severely mentally ill

There are nine state hospitals in Texas, one of which is located in San Antonio. These facilities provide inpatient hospitalization for people dealing with severe mental illness and who need intense long and short term counseling (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2004). In 2006, the San Antonio State Hospital served a daily average of 262 people and received funding for 261 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006).

Community Mental Health Centers:

Helping those with specific serious mental illnesses

Community mental health centers (also known as Local Mental Health Authorities) in Texas are publicly funded and serve adults diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder as well as children diagnosed with serious emotional disturbances. In 2005, the 39 centers in Texas served 131,444 adults and 26,213 children (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006). The Hill Country MHMR serves as the community center for Bandera, Comal, and Kendall Counties. It served 4,035 unduplicated persons in 2005. The Center for Health Care Services assists those in Bexar County, aiding 8,486 individuals in 2005 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006).

Other Mental Health Agencies:

The mental health services safety net

In the San Antonio area, a wide variety of hospitals, university-based programs, non-profit agencies, and religious institutions serve as the mental health safety net by providing counseling services for those experiencing mental health issues, often on a sliding scale basis and for Medicaid and Medicare patients. A listing of many of those programs is provided below.

Hospitals providing mental health services:

- CentroMed (El Centro del Barrio)- Ascot and Walzem branches (outpatient)
- La Paz (partial hospitalization and outpatient services)
- Laurel Ridge Treatment Center (196 beds- provides acute, residential, and partial hospitalization)
- Methodist Health Care (inpatient and outpatient)
- Nix Specialty Health Center (inpatient and home care)
- Southwest Mental Health Center (acute care program, residential treatment program, partial hospital program, outpatient services, psychology services)
- University Health System (emergency psychiatric care)

Universities providing community mental health services:

- Our Lady of the Lake University
- St. Mary's University Family Life Center

Non-profit/Religious counseling programs:

- Alpha and Omega In-Home Counseling (insurance, Medicaid, sliding scale)
- Baptist Child and Family Services- provides general counseling services as well as programs focused on at-risk youth and youth involved in the juvenile justice system (free)
- Barrio Comprehensive Family Health Care Center (sliding scale)
- Benitia Family Center-Together Opening Doors of Strength Counseling Program
- Bishop Earnest T. Dixon Clinic
- Catholic Charities Counseling and Consultation Center
- Child Guidance Center of San Antonio
- Child Safe (Alamo Area Child Advocacy Center)- provides counseling to children and non-offending family members dealing with sexual abuse
- Daughters of Charity La Mision Family Health Care
- Ella Austin Community Center- provided to youth aged 6-21
- Ecumenical Center (sliding scale)
- Excel... Rise Above the Rest program
- Family Service Association

- Healthy Mind Connection Pro Bono Clinic (part of the San Antonio Mental Health Association)
- JOVEN- focuses on prevention in at-risk youth
- Jewish Family and Children's Service
- Methodist Healthcare Ministries-Wesley Community Center
- Oakwood Baptist Counseling Center (Comal county)
- Presa Community Center
- The Rape Crisis Center for Children and Adults (free)
- Southside Family Counseling Center
- St. PJ's Home- provides services to children living there as well as the community (sliding scale)
- Urban Ministries Fairweather Lodge – residential and employment program for those with a mental health disability

Transforming Mental Health Services: The Future of Mental Health Care in Texas

By 2005, it was reported that only approximately 8.4% of the people with the most serious mental illnesses in Texas were served by community mental health centers, so the need for expanded services was apparent (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006). As a response, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration awarded Texas a five year \$92 million Mental Health Transformation State Incentive Grant in 2005. The purpose of the grant is to build “a solid foundation for delivering evidence-based mental health and related services, fostering recovery, improving quality of life, and meeting the multiple needs of mental health consumers across the life span” (Texas Mental Health Transformation, 2008).

To create that transformation, eight community groups throughout Texas were selected, including the Bexar County Community Collaborative. This organization, which includes a variety of local hospital, legal, and state organizations, assesses and attempts to resolve the need for mental health services in the San Antonio area.

The Texas Senate approved legislation in 2007 that would require health insurers to provide parity, or equality, of medical and mental health care services. However, the bill only affected insurers who already provided mental health coverage. It also excluded coverage by businesses with fewer than 51 employees (KaiserNetwork.org, 2007), so the need for quality mental health care will likely continue.

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