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Task Force Releases Recommendations to Improve Behavioral Health in Montgomery County

(DAYTON, Sept. 26, 2023) Montgomery County’s Behavioral Health Task Force released its initial recommendations for improving behavioral health coordination and treatment outcomes at the Board of County Commissioners Meeting on Tuesday.

Along with forming a multi-agency monitoring body, the Task Force recommended quarterly reviews of county-level data to quickly address gaps that affect care and the delivery of services. Increased communication among agency leadership to promote collaboration between all levels of staff and leadership was also recommended.

The Task Force also called for the creation of a strategic plan to address standards for objectives, accountability, transparency and assignment of short-term and long-term action items. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will be established so progress can be monitored and reported to accomplish Behavioral Health Task Force recommendations.

“Our county has been through so much in the past few years,” said Commission President Debbie Lieberman. “In addition to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we’ve experienced the Memorial Day tornadoes, Oregon District mass shooting and other events that have contributed to increased need for behavioral health services.”

Prompted by a 26 percent increase in behavioral health issues at area emergency departments since 2019, the County Commission formed the Task Force in January of 2023 in partnership with the Greater Dayton Area Hospital Association (GDAHA). The Task Force is comprised of healthcare providers, leaders and community partners, which have been meeting monthly.

“We cannot operate in silos when addressing our community’s behavioral health crisis,” said Commissioner Carolyn Rice. “It’s going to take a coordinated approach with hospitals, independent providers, law enforcement and other stakeholders working together to quickly get people the help they need in the most appropriate setting.”

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Since January, partners in the behavioral health continuum have shared their challenges with the Behavioral Health Task Force to improve their understanding before recommendations could be developed.

According to the Task Force's report, limited resources and crowded emergency departments have escalated hospital incidents, causing violence and unsafe interactions for clinicians and non-clinical staff. Behavioral health providers struggle with high demand for services, leading to long waitlists for treatment while reimbursement rates fail to cover the cost of treatment.

Police officers are frequently the first responders to mental health emergencies. Limited training and resources for handling these situations can lead to escalating conflict and harm to individuals. Those with mental health issues are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. For inmates with underlying mental health issues, county jails have often become the de facto treatment center, and limited physical and behavioral health resources have complicated individual's recovery and ability to succeed upon release.

"We need to collectively decide what a fully-integrated and highly effective behavioral health system can look like in the next 10 years," said Commissioner Judy Dodge. "Then we need to decide what key behaviors will be required of partners in this effort. There are communities out there who are doing this well, and we need to emulate their best practices for the good of our citizens."

Task Force members identified the need to engage frontline staff to ensure their observations and insights helped to shape the recommendations. More than 300 surveys were received from employees in hospitals, behavioral health providers, courts, law enforcement, the jail and regional dispatch. 77 percent of the respondents agreed the system needed improvement.

The group also recommends a workforce supply and demand study to outline the gaps, needs and opportunities for all partners serving the behavioral health continuum. They also recommended increased funding and support for local psychiatric residency programs, citing the need increased demand for services coinciding with high numbers of retirements in future years as the current provider population ages.

"Ensuring that there is collaboration between organizations serving the behavioral health continuum is essential to improving individuals' outcomes and supporting our region's caregivers," said Sarah Hackenbracht, President & CEO of the Greater Dayton Area Hospital Association. "We look forward to continuing to partner with Montgomery County and the Behavioral Health Taskforce members to bring these recommendations to fruition."

The full Behavioral Health Task Force report is available at mcoho.org.