

MENTAL HEALTH WEEKLY

Essential information for decision-makers

Volume 31 Number 12
March 22, 2021
Print ISSN 1058-1103
Online ISSN 1556-7583

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DOI: 10.1002/mhw

Court decision about MH treatment another important step for parity

A federal court ruled March 5 that the exclusion of a core treatment for autism by UnitedHealth violates the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA) as well as United's fiduciary responsibilities under the Employee Retirement and Income Security Act (ERISA).

The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California decision on March 5 in *Jane Doe v. United Behavioral Health, et al.*, also marks a win for Zuckerman Spaeder

and its ongoing efforts to hold insurers accountable in ensuring parity insurance coverage of mental health treatment.

Such was the case with *Wit v. UBH* that has had national implications and has been called "ground-breaking," when a San Francisco federal court ruled March 5, 2019, that United Behavioral Health (UBH) used flawed and overly restrictive guidelines when it denied mental health and substance use disorder coverage claims for tens of thousands of patients, including children (see *MHW*, March 9, 2019).

The current complaint had been filed on behalf of Jane Doe, mother of John, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). His health

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Bottom Line...

The court rejected UnitedHealth's argument that it cannot be held responsible for the federal parity act because it was administering an employer-sponsored plan.

Culturally responsive resource hub to support MH for communities of color

Observing a goal to connect people with culturally and linguistically appropriate services and overcome disparities in accessing behavioral health services for communities of color, the Network of Care Massachusetts on March 16 launched a collection of support groups, therapist directories and culturally responsive clinics and programs and other resources.

The Culturally Responsive Behavioral Health Resource Hub also includes local and national groups and related social services that focus specifically on supporting the mental health and well-being of Black, Latinx and Asian American individuals and communities across the commonwealth.

Bottom Line...

Massachusetts consumers can find resources and behavioral health providers who provide culturally responsive support for Black, Asian and Latinx populations and communities.

The launch of the new hub officially marks the one-year anniversary of the Network of Care Massachusetts — a comprehensive online resource to help anyone find behavioral health resources and treatment in their community.

Following the launch of the new information hub this month, and a live event had been planned, which

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Poll: Parents reporting teens' MH worsening during pandemic

The pandemic has taken a large toll on teens' mental health, according to a national poll on children's health released March 15. Restrictions put in place to contain COVID-19 may be particularly difficult for teens, who rely heavily on their peer and social connections for emotional support, according to the new report.

The C. S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents about the emotional impact pandemic restrictions have had on their teens age 13–18.

The *Mott Poll Report: How the Pandemic Has Impacted Teen Mental Health* was administered in January to a randomly selected group of adults.

Although serious illness from COVID-19 is uncommon among teens, the changes brought on by the pandemic have wreaked havoc on their lives, according to the poll. Many have experienced disruptions to their normal routines, including closed schools, canceled activities and an inability to hang out with friends and extended family. Parents in this Mott Poll have shared that there has been a significant mental health impact of the pandemic for many of their teens.

Most parents (73%) report that COVID-19 has had a very or somewhat negative impact on their teen's ability to interact with their friends. Around half of parents (46%) say they have noticed a new or worsening mental health condition for their teen since the start of the pandemic.

Parent report of pandemic-related mental health change reflects some differences for teen girls and boys. More parents of teen girls than parents of teen boys note an increase in anxiety/worry (36% vs. 19%) or depression/sadness (31% vs. 18%). In contrast, similar proportions of parents report negative changes in their teen's sleep (24% vs. 21%), withdrawing from family

(14% vs. 13%) and aggressive behavior (8% vs. 9%).

Various strategies

Parents who note negative changes in their teen's mental health have tried various strategies to help their teen. Half (52%) have tried relaxing family COVID-19 rules to allow their teen to have more contact with friends; most of these (81%) say it has helped. Similarly, half of parents (47%) have tried relaxing family rules about social media; most (70%) report it helped.

Roughly one-third of parents (34%) report talking with teachers or school counselors, with over half (57%) saying it helped. About one in four parents (29%) report seeking help for their teen from a mental health provider, with most (74%) feeling it helped. Roughly one-third of parents (32%) report looking for information on the internet, with 58% saying it has helped; and 25% of parents report encouraging their teen to try a web-based program or an app to improve their mental health, with 60% saying it has helped.

Implications

At just the age when they are biologically primed to seek independence from their families, restrictions to control the COVID-19 pandemic have kept teens at home, according to the report. It is no surprise that many teens are feeling frustrated, anxious and disconnected due to social distancing and disruption of their usual schedules for school and outside activities, the authors stated.

These problems may be new for some teens, but for others they may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. It can be challenging for parents to assess the seriousness of the situation, and when it may be necessary to seek outside help. Although teens can experience a wide range of severity of mental health problems, if parents hear their teen express any thoughts of suicide or

self-harm, it is important to seek mental health assistance immediately, the authors stated.

Recent research has shown teen depression during the pandemic to be associated with teens' own fears and uncertainties, as well as high levels of parental stress. Parents also may want to consider whether they are transferring some of their own pandemic-related stress onto their teens. Parents have a critical role to play in helping their teens cope with the stress of the pandemic, the report noted.

Mental health experts advise that one of the most important things for parents to do is keep lines of communication open; ask their teen how they are doing and create the space for them to speak honestly so they can provide help when needed. Parents also need to remember it is normal for teens to crave privacy from their family. Giving them space for some quiet time, creative time or music time can be helpful to their mental health. •

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was the same day the commonwealth shut down due to COVID-19.

A virtual kickoff commenced instead, said Danna Mauch, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH). The site contains a searchable database of more than 5,500 community behavioral health and related social services that people might depend on, such as clinics, residential hospitals, behavioral health services, food pantries and affordable housing entities, said Mauch. The services on the site are searchable by ZIP code and service type.

The Network of Care Massachusetts site, since its 2020 launch, has helped residents of the commonwealth, with nearly 38,000 individuals accessing the site, officials stated. The site is funded by the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation,

the MetroWest Health Foundation and the C. F. Adams Charitable Trust.

“In addition to the 5,500-plus services, we have a library of over 30,000 articles, advisories and reports that help people grow their mental health literacy tips on the best treatment,” Mauch said.

Cultural support

Noting the “reckoning of racial injustice” over the past year, Mauch told *MHW*, “A mental health epidemic in the context of the virus pandemic was impacting communities of color.” MAMH officials then decided a multicultural behavioral health resource was warranted to make access to services even more available, she said.

The Culturally Responsive Behavioral Health Resource Hub is now part of the Network of Care Massachusetts site. With an expanded suite of culturally responsive resources and care options, Network of Care Massachusetts aims to expand access to behavioral and mental health care, especially to those in historically underserved and under-represented communities, officials stated.

Research demonstrates that culturally responsive behavioral health services are more effective, improving client engagement, treatment retention and outcomes, according to the MAMH.

The cultural hub is a novel thing, said Mauch. While there are other network-of-care sites across the county, every one is built differently, she said. The hub helps people with information to find a therapist as well as support groups that could be services delivered by and for communities of color, she said.

One of the resources, for example, BARE Mental Health & Wellness, provides services to promote mental health and wellness within Black communities as well as supporting

systemic change to address disparities within health care and educational institutions, businesses, agencies and firms.

“The overarching goal of the Culturally Responsive Behavioral Health Resource Hub is to help people make sense of a very fragmented system of care and find services that meet their need,” Mauch said. Telehealth continues to be available, “but once we come out of COVID, people are going to want services they can easily get to,” she said.

The sites do not list available therapists on their homepages, said Mauch, but they do offer links to navigators for services in the community.

‘A mental health epidemic in the context of the virus pandemic was impacting communities of color.’

Danna Mauch

“The problem is individual therapists can’t keep the information up to date on their websites on insurance companies that pay them,” she said. “We only list licensed and accredited programs, but [they have] links to social workers and psychology organizations where they can get the name directly from them.”

“This is a live site,” said Mauch, and they are asking for users to provide feedback. “We want them to tell us about what services we may have missed, what resources are out in the community that may not be widely available,” she said.

“We do track metrics in terms of how many visits come to the site and which links are open,” said Mauch.

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“We also know how many stay on the site. We collect those data and we use those metrics. We aggregate the data once a month.”

Finding support

The site provides links to live navigators consumers can reach when they call the National Alliance on Mental Health Massachusetts Compass helpline operated by peers and family members. The navigators have firsthand experience dealing with problems related to behavioral health issues. Consumers can also find support for substance use disorder issues, she noted.

Providers are also offering many outpatient therapy services during COVID-19 via telehealth, via an audio/visual platform, said Mauch.

The Network of Care is a tool to help people understand the system and find services they can pursue, said Mauch. They can apply for Massachusetts health benefits or become clients of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health or other state agencies if they are eligible, she noted.

Consumers can research any topic on behavioral health or health and well-being. “We believe this is a good resource for people,” Mauch said. •

BRIEFLY NOTED

AAP guidance emphasizes need for pediatricians to address BH

The strain of the COVID-19 pandemic on children underscores the need for pediatricians to address emotional and behavioral health as part of standard care, according to updated American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) interim guidance. *Supporting the Emotional and Behavioral Health Needs of Children, Adolescents and Families during the*

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