

News Release

Contact: Tina Clark, APR
207-783-4663 x 158 or 207-468-4766 (cell)

Caring for all of you!

Project Celebrates Three Years of Changing Local Care at Dec 21 Event

Three years ago Tri-County Mental Health Services (TCMHS) and its partners at Central Maine Healthcare's Rumford Hospital medical practices launched a project aimed at changing the way people in Western Maine receive care. The innovative project was funded by the Maine Health Access Foundation (MeHAF), and brought behavioral health providers into the doctor's offices at Swift River Family Medicine, Elsemore Dixfield Family Medicine, and River Valley Internal Medicine. Since then, hundreds of people have experienced the benefits of more holistic and integrated treatment.

Catherine R. Ryder, Executive Director of TCMHS and Project Lead for the Integrated Primary Care project, says it has broken down many barriers. "There is an increasing sense of partnership between providers from different disciplines, and between patient and providers. We know this is the way healthcare should be delivered...with everyone working as an integrated team toward the same goals."

The project has shown great results, including increased satisfaction for doctors in working with behavioral health professionals, increased sharing of information in "real-time" with a fully integrated electronic medical record, improved health for patients with complex needs, less waiting time for behavioral health assessment, greater patient satisfaction, and reduced stigma.

For Psychiatrist Tom Sneed, Medical Director for TCMHS, the project opened doors and brought his specialized expertise to more people. "It has given me the opportunity to see, first hand, the behavioral health needs of patients seen by primary care physicians and the nuances of the system in which they are treated. This has given me an ideal frame of reference to develop and offer clinically effective and financially sustainable options for meeting those needs," he explains. He is looking forward to ongoing consultation with the primary care doctors to help manage complex psychiatric medications and coordinate care. They have begun using telepsychiatry to provide face to face consultation when needed. This will make it possible for patients and doctors to work with Dr. Sneed face to face over a computer monitor, making access to psychiatric treatment and consultation much more accessible locally.

Primary Care Physicians appreciate having the specialty care on-site. Research tells us that most patients present their health concerns as **both** biological and psychological. Primary care physicians lack the time to provide counseling and often lack the expertise in complex psychiatric medication management. That's where the TCMHS team comes in. Velma Evans is one of the two Licensed Clinical Social Workers in the project. "The best part of being a provider to patients in the PCP's offices is that I am able provide services to individuals in all aspects of their lives, to treat the whole person not just the mental health part of the individual," she says. Many of the people she works with would not have sought counseling outside their doctors offices. "Most of

the time their struggles are not devastating and all that is needed at times is a person to listen and offer encouragement and direction,” she explains. And by getting that encouragement early, they may avoid more serious problems. *“My hope for the future is that Integrated Primary Care is available in every PCP’s office in the State of Maine,” she adds.*

The Western Maine project has also been applauded for its focus on health education and patient/consumer empowerment through monthly Dinner and Discussion events on topics from diabetes and depression to agoraphobia and obesity. The events have become a place for people and providers to share information and insights into the healthcare system. They have also stimulated a network of invested community members eager to share their voice in helping to shape the future of health care. The final gathering on December 21st will review highlights from the project.

Everyone is invited to celebrate the success of the Integrated Primary Care initiative at a free event on Wednesday, December 21, from 4pm – 6pm at the Tri-County Mental Health Services clinic at 49 Congress Street in Rumford. Please call 369-1194 for more information and to reserve your seat.

Success Stories

After major surgery for cancer, Norma became depressed and worried about the cancer returning. She began to feel stressed about all kinds of things, including her family and financial stress. She started seeing Velma Evans at her doctor’s office through the Integrated Primary Care Project, and learned some stress management skills. They also discussed alcohol. Norma had started having sips during the day to ease her stress, only to find herself intoxicated and having to nap in the afternoon. With the help of therapy, her doctor’s care, stress management, and the support of her husband, she was able to stop drinking. She now has other ways to manage stress and is enjoying quality time with her children, grandchildren, and husband. Another benefit is the money she is saving that is helping her financial position. The best news is that she remains cancer-free!

Paul was 55 years old and had been living for some time with severe anxiety, chronic pain and addiction, three conditions that often come together. When his doctor suggested he talk with the therapist right down the hall, he started slowly due to the level of his anxiety. His appointments were just a half hour every other week and included his wife to help reinforce what he was learning in sessions and ease his concerns. Working together with the therapist, they focused on coping skills to manage anxiety, accepting physical limitations to prevent further injury and connecting with resources. After a few months Paul stabilized on his medications and began to accept the limitations on his body. He learned new ways to live with his anxiety and to manage symptoms, and continues in long term counseling to support his recovery.