Survey: BH organizations closing programs, reducing staff amid pandemic

Behavioral health organizations have canceled, rescheduled, and even turned away patients, according to results of a new survey on the economic impact of COVID-19 — an impact felt even more among smaller organizations. The survey of 880 community behavioral health organizations (CBHOs) around the country served to clarify the impact of the virus on patients, employment safety, and financial viability.

The online survey, “COVID-19 Economic Impact on Behavioral Health Organizations,” was conducted by ndp|analytics and the National Council for Behavioral Health and released April 16.

While Congress provided some funding for CBHOs in its latest stimulus package, it didn’t do nearly enough to stave off the challenging conditions providers are now faced with, says the president and CEO of the National Council for Behavioral Health. “It helped, but it did not solve the full problem,” Chuck Ingoglia told MHW.

Most behavioral health not-for-profit organizations tend to not have a lot of cash reserves, said Ingoglia. Most did not provide telehealth pre-

Bottom Line...
New survey results reveal ongoing challenges faced by community behavioral health organizations confirming the need for the urgent emergency funding requested by the National Council this month.

Upheaval in mental health court could signal broader county reform

The departure of the Multnomah County, Oregon, mental health court’s entire staff of court monitors after an investigation into worker misconduct stands as the latest development in a broader examination of operations in the county’s Mental Health and Addiction Services Division. Given a long history of upheaval within the county government’s behavioral health agency, it remains open to speculation as to whether this most recent event will help generate lasting reform of the county’s mental health service system.

“Multnomah County has struggled significantly over the past couple of decades,” Chris Bounneff, executive director of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Oregon, told MHW. “We go through this tumult every few years, where we have a report, then an investigation, and then changes in the system.”

Ebony Clarke, who has served as director of the county behavioral health division for about a year, will be responsible at the administrative level for ensuring that the present
The survey found even more severe impacts for smaller organizations (serving 2,000 patients or less annually), which have canceled, rescheduled or turned away 35.5% of patients.

According to the employment impact, 46.7% of behavioral health organizations have had to, or plan to, lay off or furlough employees as a result of COVID-19. Layoffs and furloughs are most prevalent at larger organizations (serving over 8,000 patients annually), where 49.8% have had to, or plan to, lay off or furlough employees.

Survey respondents (82.9%) reported they do not have enough personal protective equipment (PPE) for two months of operations. The lack of PPE is most prevalent at medium-sized organizations (serving between 2,000 and 8,000 patients annually), where 86.5% of organizations do not believe they have enough PPE for two months.

Earlier this month, the National Council requested Vice President Mike Pence’s help in locating PPE for behavioral health care providers.

Resilience impact

According to the survey, 62.1% of behavioral health organizations believe they can only survive financially for three months or less under the current COVID-19 conditions. Only 94% of organizations believe they could survive a year or more.

While 12.9% of larger organizations expect to survive past the one-year mark, only 6% of smaller organizations believe that is possible.

Inogglia stated that for far, behavioral health organizations have not had to cease operations altogether. The concerns, however, are still there, he said. “How much money can they bear?” he noted. It’s what led the National Council to make that emergency funding request to Congress to address the pandemic’s impact on the enormous barriers for people struggling with mental health and addiction.

Even in the face of much uncertainty and tremendous challenges, behavioral health providers are still delivering meals, for example, even if day programs are no longer meeting, said Inogglia. “You don’t want to abandon clients or the community in the midst of a pandemic,” he said.

Next wave

The National Council is also concerned about the “next wave” of issues to occur following this pandemic, which is the mental health and addiction impact, he said. “Alcohol consumption has gone up, as well as increasing levels of anxiety and depression,” Inogglia stated. “You don’t want behavioral health to implode.”

Mental health and addictions providers are going to be very much
in demand. “We’re already on shaky ground,” Ingoglia said. Before this next need emerges, it’s important that providers be at the ready and are able to provide services, he said.

The good news, he noted, is that there is a lot of awareness around mental health and addiction and the impact of COVID-19. The survey helped put in perspective the crisis confronting behavioral health organizations, he said.

“We’re incredibly proud of behavioral health organizations all over the country” that are moving forward with telehealth support in such a short time frame and delivering food and medication to established clients, said Ingoglia. “There’s been no focus on the incredible work they’re doing to continue to be an important support for their clients and community,” he said.

New Jersey weighs in

The CEO of the Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris Inc. said he is pleased that New Jersey has been proactive and flexible and has provided regulatory relief. “It’s been a tremendous help,” Robert Davison told MHW. “We’re very grateful.”

The association’s main office in North Jersey is roughly 15 miles west of Manhattan, with additional offices also close by in East Orange, West Orange, Passaic and Parsippany. “We are in the epicenter,” said Davison. “It’s been unprecedented and has had a dramatic impact on our agency and our ability to deliver services.”

“Many parts of the country are not impacted as much as New Jersey,” added Davison. “We’re providing services to the extent that we can.” The association has applied for the Paycheck Protection Program but hasn’t heard back yet, he said.

“We transitioned very quickly to telehealth,” said Davison. “Fortunately, we had the technology infrastructure needed to do that.” The Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris was also one of the 800 responding organizations to the National Council’s survey.

The association’s clients are still very vulnerable, he noted. Social workers continue to make food and medication deliveries. Additionally, patients are being given injections and having their blood levels taken. “The providers are doing face-to-face consultations while following CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines,” he said, adding that services are also being provided to the homeless community.

“Our direct care staff has been very heroic in carrying out their duties,” Davison said. Many staff are conducting telehealth and care management services and psychiatric counseling.

However, providers are still losing about $50,000 a week, he said, even after considerable regulation relief.

Flattening the curve

“I’m concerned about the curve behind the curve,” said Davison, explaining that by saying that any economic downturn, much less a pandemic, results in increases in domestic violence and mental illness and substance abuse issues. “What are we going to do to flatten that curve?” he noted.

Davison added, “There needs to be a process in place right now to ensure behavioral health services in this country are sustainable now and in the future.”

As the government works on its fourth economic stimulus package, “it’s important that the behavioral health community is remembered in that package in order to sustain current activities and prepare for the future,” said Davison.

Bottom Line...
This study, which assesses the mental health burden of Chinese health care workers, serves as important evidence to direct the promotion of mental well-being among health care workers, say researchers.

Recent research to assess the magnitude of mental health outcomes and associated factors among health care workers treating patients exposed to COVID-19 in China has found that many are psychologically stressed, raising concerns about the psychological well-being of physicians and nurses involved in the acute COVID-19 outbreak.

The study, “Factors Associated With Mental Health Outcomes Among Health Care Workers Exposed to Coronavirus Disease 2019,” continues on next page.