

Behavioral Health: An Unprecedented Time of Need and Opportunity

The behavioral health landscape has changed dramatically since the onset of COVID-19. Challenges that existed prior to the pandemic got worse, while opportunities to improve care got better.

Symptoms of stress and anxiety, as well as behavioral health treatment, became somewhat normalized given the universal uncertainty and challenges associated with the pandemic. At the same time, a flood of mental wellness and virtual care apps became available. Ads touted the benefits of mindfulness and talk therapy, while celebrities talked publicly about their personal struggles. Yet, for the wider population, there remains a stigma surrounding behavioral health needs.

Helion expects the discipline to continue to evolve as providers, including those in the post-acute care space, implement new and better ways to provide quality care.

Behavioral Health in 2022

“The current state of behavioral health care is one of unprecedented need and opportunity,” says Dr. Bradley Karlin, PhD, MBA. Dr. Karlin is vice president and executive medical director of Behavioral Health at Highmark Health.

“Rates of stress and behavioral health problems, like anxiety and depression, are at an all-time high. This is largely as a result of the pandemic. Nobody has been immune and that has a number of significant consequences,” continues Dr. Karlin.

“High rates of unmet mental health needs existed to a significant extent prior to the pandemic. The pandemic only exacerbated the existing state and brought unmet needs to broader public consciousness,” says Dr. Karlin.

Getting Past the Stigma

While the pandemic brought behavioral health needs to the forefront, there is still a stigma attached. This can lead to a lag time of up to 10 years before a patient actively seeks treatment, if at all.

Older adults are the least likely to receive behavioral health care. However, when they do, they benefit just as much as younger patients, if not more. This is because behavioral health issues have a direct correlation with physical health, especially for patients with chronic conditions.

“Untreated behavioral health issues can significantly impair both physical health and the treatment process,” explains Dr. Karlin. “Having therapists, psychiatrists, and coaches as

part of the care team can help improve treatment adherence and outcomes for physical health conditions.”

“Improving behavioral health and health behaviors, such as sleep, stress management, motivation, and adherence and lifestyle choices, can help patients accomplish not only their behavioral health goals, but their broader health care goals,” continues Dr. Karlin. “An integrated model, like the Living Health model we are rolling out to Highmark members utilizing AHN Healthcare@Home, is designed to improve engagement and overall health and quality of care.”

A Strategy for the Future

Highmark’s enterprise behavioral health strategy will make the company a leader in providing high-quality, accessible, and personalized care.

The goal is to elevate the status of behavioral health, so it is on par with physical health, which aligns with the organization’s Living Health model. It’s a fundamental change to how behavioral health care is currently delivered, creating the opportunity to treat issues earlier on.

For Helion, this interventional approach is consistent with the company’s drive for innovative, data-driven treatment in the post-acute care space. Sophisticated algorithms help identify patients needing behavioral health services to successfully heal in home.

This strategy also ties directly into Helion’s value-based payment model. This provides financial incentives to providers for offering higher quality care that has the greatest evidence of effectiveness for a specific condition.

Innovation Creates Opportunity

“Over the last several years, there have been substantial advances in technology within behavioral health and wellness,” says Dr. Karlin. “The pandemic has accelerated innovation within the field by 20 to 30 years.”

“Technology has improved the accessibility of care,” continues Dr. Karlin. “It’s also helped to make treatment much more acceptable to many individuals who might be less inclined to go to a behavioral health clinic.”

“Research has shown that telebehavioral health is as effective as in-person treatment for most patients. We’ve seen exponential increases in the delivery of virtual care. In 2020 alone, we saw an increase of almost 7,000% in the delivery of telehealth across Highmark,” states Dr. Karlin.

“This exponential increase in telebehavioral health care continued through 2021, and we expect it to continue to do so this year,” continues Dr. Karlin. “Virtual visits have reshaped

Helion Bulletin
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the delivery of behavioral health care for all people, especially those who are healing in home. Being able to connect via a smartphone or computer often means the difference as to whether or not someone will receive care. It can also help to reduce stigma that inhibits help-seeking, especially among older adults.”

Transforming Behavioral Wellness

This is an unrealized time of need and opportunity for behavioral health. The field is ripe for innovation and transformation. Helion is committed to working together with its providers to create new evidence-based, personalized, and proactive models to improve behavioral wellness.

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