

MENTAL HEALTH WEEKLY

Essential information for decision-makers

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While the mental health community applauds passage of emergency funding to stem the COVID-19 crisis, and the government's move to lift restrictions on Medicare telehealth services, some say more could be done. Meanwhile, they're urging self-care and knowledge of public health information.

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Mental health groups providing support, education in wake of COVID-19

As news and updates continue to spread regarding the new coronavirus (COVID-19), the deadly virus that causes respiratory illness and pneumonia, mental health groups and organizations have issued information to consumers, providers and the mental health community at large about ways of addressing the virus and seeking information from public health sources.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has urged the public to remain calm, saying in a March 6 statement that the likelihood of most people becoming sick from COVID-19 is low. They advise the public to follow the advice of medical experts who are cautioning everyone to wash their hands and stay home from work or school if

Bottom Line...

The American Psychological Association intends to reach out to major insurance companies regarding their telehealth policies and advocating for psychology telehealth services.

they feel sick.

Mental health groups also had much to say regarding President Trump's March 6 release of \$8.3 billion in emergency funding to address COVID-19. The funding provides for widespread efforts to fight COVID-19, including allocating funds for research, vaccine development, prevention and treatment services.

Included in the appropriations bill is \$500 million to lift restrictions
See COVID-19 page 2

Family factors play key role in children's suicidal ideation

While the rate of death by suicide among children in the United States has tripled within the last decade, little is known about the prevalence and correlates of suicidal ideation and behaviors in children, according to researchers of a new study published online in *JAMA*.

According to the study, "Prevalence and Family-Related Factors Associated With Suicidal Ideation, Suicide Attempts, and Self-injury in

Children Aged 9 to 10 Years," researchers set out to determine how common suicidality is among pre-adolescent children and whether certain family factors are associated with children's suicidality.

"The overarching goal of the research is to better understand the prevalence of suicide ideation and suicide attempts among children, and to better understand what factors predict suicide ideation and behavior in children," Danielle DeVille, doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Tulsa and graduate research assistant at the Laureate Institute for Brain Research and study co-author told *MHW*.

Much of the prior research on
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Bottom Line...

Researchers found the association of family factors, including high family conflict and low parental monitoring, with suicidality and self-injury in children.

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on telehealth services for Medicare beneficiaries. The provision will allow the U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary to lift Medicare telehealth restrictions so that care can be provided regardless of where a patient is located, including at home, allowing patients to continue to seek treatment during this public health crisis

A qualifying provider, such as a psychologist, would need to have provided a service to that patient in the last three years — so this only applies to existing patients, according to the APA.

The APA commended the move by Congress and the administration. “We call on Congress to pass additional reforms to tackle this developing epidemic and to modernize Medicare to eliminate other important access barriers for our nation’s seniors, who are some of the people most affected by this virus,” APA President Sandra L. Shullman, Ph.D., said in a statement.

“While this is great news in light of this current public health emergency, the APA will continue to advocate for a permanent lifting of Medicare originating and geographic site requirements, and including the home as a site of service, to improve patient access to psychologists’ services,” Kim I. Mills, APA

spokesperson, told *MHW*. “We are also reaching out to major insurance companies regarding their telehealth policies and advocating for psychological telehealth services.”

The American Psychiatric Association also applauded Congress’s passage of the emergency funding package and temporary lifting on Medicaid access to telehealth services. “This will potentially allow patients with mental health and substance use disorders who may be worried about contracting the virus to continue to receive treatment during this public health emergency,” said American Psychiatric Association President Bruce Schwartz, M.D., in a statement.

“Epidemics can cause people to experience stress and anxiety,” American Psychiatric Association CEO and Medical Director Saul Levin, M.D., M.P.A., said in a news release. “Having tools and access to solutions like telepsychiatry, as well as clear communications from the media and government, will go a long way toward mitigating that stress.”

Congressional support

Prior to the inclusion of the telehealth restriction lift measure in the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020, the American Psychiatric Association had written a

letter March 2 to House and Senate leadership recommending that any supplemental package passed by Congress include that provision.

The spread of COVID-19, the American Psychiatric Association stated, has the potential to create barriers for access to psychiatric services. For instance, public transportation may be disrupted, leaving some patients unable to keep appointments with their doctors. In addition, schools are enduring long-term closures, and some communities are recommending that those in affected communities self-isolate, in order to prevent further spread of the virus. In such scenarios, those currently receiving mental health services — and those who may need it in the future — will be without access to care. One way to mitigate this is through the use of telepsychiatry — that is, live videoconferencing between a psychiatrist and a patient, the American Psychiatric Association stated.

Andrew Sperling, director of legislative affairs for advocacy and public policy at the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), said that while the telehealth restrictions have been lifted, more could have been done. “It’s a positive step, but it could have gone further,” Sperling told *MHW*. The provision, he noted, modifies Section 1135 B in the

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Social Security Act.

The limitations center around the ability to see patients not seen before who haven't been engaged in the health care system, said Sperling. "The provision provides for individuals who only have preexisting relationships with a provider," he said. "It should have been expanded further."

Sperling said that, meanwhile, he hopes that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) will work with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and HHS to further educate people with a mental illness about this virus. "People with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder have higher chronic comorbid medical conditions (i.e., chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes and asthma)," said Sperling. Seniors, too, are at high risk of contracting the virus, he said.

People with a serious mental illness also have a higher mortality risk associated with smoking, which makes them more likely to have respiratory disorders that make them more vulnerable, he said. If people with a serious mental illness were to contract the virus, they could be at a significantly higher risk of being very sick and potentially dying, he said.

NAMI provided information about risk assessment and offered tips for people with mental illness.

For those the CDC has described as higher-risk, they're to ask their health care provider about teletherapy or mental health services alone, stated NAMI. For anyone worried about access to prescribed medications, they can ask their health care provider about obtaining 90-day supplies versus a 60- or 30-day supply. If not possible, NAMI urged consumers to refill their medications as soon as they allow.

'It's a positive step, but it could have gone further.'

Andrew Sperling

Funding concerns

The National Council for Behavioral Health issued a statement Feb. 27 regarding the Trump administration's decision to transfer \$4.9 million from SAMHSA in response to COVID-19.

"While the amount of money in

question may seem small, people will suffer, because SAMHSA plays a vital role in the fight against the opioid epidemic and in efforts to address our mental health crises," Chuck Ingoglia, National Council president and CEO, stated. "We urge the administration to find a new source of funding to help the nation's response to the spread of coronavirus."

Ingoglia told *MHW* last week that the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2020 includes a requirement that HHS reimburse \$136 million to programs across the agency that were temporarily transferred to support emergency preparedness and response activities at the CDC and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response.

"Many state mental health authorities are putting out advisories, and in general everyone is following the CDC guidance regarding personal hygiene," Ingoglia added. •

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Partnership sets new vision for MH care delivery for Minnesotans

Observing the challenges people in Minnesota face in finding mental health services, and, upon doing so, experiencing long wait times, a coalition of public and private purchasers and a behavioral health company have partnered to offer a solution to these challenges to the state's employers.

The collaboration, announced last month between the Minnesota Health Action Group and AiRCare Health, aims to help Minnesotans obtain speedier access to mental

Bottom Line...

Program leaders say they hope their work to improve mental health care for all Minnesotans will set a new standard for other states.

health services and schedule same-day appointments with a behavioral health clinician. The goal is to improve both short- and long-term outcomes related to remission from depression and anxiety, say program leaders.

Leaders say this first-of-its-kind partnership seeks to achieve same-day mental health appointments and improved care coordination through

AiRCare's proactive, telephone-based, care management solution.

"People in Minnesota and across the country have a significant problem with access," Deb Krause, vice president with the Minnesota Health Action Group, told *MHW*. "We're hoping [this partnership] will change that reality for Minnesotans and more broadly."

The partnership aims to address the critically important issue of access by having patients get to treatment and the path to care they need, said Krause. Employers find it frustrating that employees have been experiencing gaps in care, she said.

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