



CASE STUDY: Expanding Behavioral Health Care Access to Foster Community Wellness

Saint Anthony Hospital | Chicago, Illinois

Overview

For residents living in Chicago's 60623 ZIP code, known as South Lawndale, Saint Anthony Hospital (SAH) Community Wellness Programs have provided a wide variety of free social and health-related services for more than 20 years. The safety-net hospital is committed to delivering high-quality care for those who need it the most, such as immigrant, Hispanic and Black populations, which are disproportionately under or uninsured and more likely to suffer from health disparities compared to their white counterparts. In 2018, of the approximately 86,000 people in the 60623 ZIP code, Hispanics and Black people accounted for 66.1% and 30.4%, respectively. More critical to SAH's mission is the fact that 33.4% of 60623 residents live in poverty.¹

When SAH Community Wellness was established in the late 1990s, it employed seven staff members and focused primarily on mental health services. Today, it has a staff of 25 and has expanded programs to address and provide health access, community nursing, community organizing and family services. The Community Wellness Programs specific to mental health services include free individual and couples psychotherapy, as well as therapeutic and psycho-educational groups to support adults experiencing chronic depression, anxiety and the effects of trauma. SAH clinicians and social workers are both bilingual and culturally competent to reflect the patients they serve.

A Pandemic's Toll

The COVID-19 pandemic has unquestionably affected SAH Community Wellness Programs. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Brown communities has been widely reported. In



Chicago, African American patients with COVID-19 are 2-3 times more likely to die from the virus than whites who tested positive, and Latinos account for 47% of positive cases, although they represent only 29% of the population. Through the months of April and May, while the state of Illinois observed positive cases around 14%, the neighboring communities that SAH serves saw their positive case numbers around 48%.² Despite the drastic toll on the community, SAH is still completely committed to their programming — a unique feat considering they offer these services at no charge.

Like many mental health services, SAH Community Wellness has felt the weight of financial strain and uncertainty. Last month, Politico [reported](#) that almost half of mental health and addiction providers say they can only survive for six months or fewer in the current fiscal climate, according to a June survey of more than 660 behavioral health providers. When the government began paying out assistance, it based these funds on Medicare reimbursement, which usually provides only a fraction of behavioral health revenues. The hospital went from six months cash on hand, to only two days and was tinkering on very dire times had it not been for the second round of federal government funding targeting COVID-19 patients, of

which SAH treated a high volume of those requiring care.

“Did we get all the funding we needed? No,” said James Sifuentes, senior vice president of mission and community development at Saint Anthony Hospital. “We can never have enough resources in this community to serve our patient populations. The Community Wellness staff is down from 37 to 25 now.”

While SAH continues to provide mental health services, Sifuentes explained it is challenging. The rapid expansion and adoption of telehealth is one strategy in place to provide access to care, while still abiding by social distancing guidelines. Although physicians and therapists have welcomed the use of telehealth, barriers to widespread use, such as internet access and difficulties in using technology among older patients, are a real concern. Staff members at SAH Community Wellness pride themselves on being entrenched in the community, outside the walls of the hospital, through activities such as health fairs and educational programs. While these activities took a brief pause at the onset of the pandemic, Sifuentes is excited that his team has started doing this crucial work again.

Lessons Learned

Providing high-quality care to patients is only possible if you have the clinicians, caregivers and staff to support those efforts. That is why SAH has worked hard to not only educate patients on the safety of care in its facilities, but also provide services for clinicians and staff impacted by the pandemic.

“It was imperative for us to provide counseling services for our providers who may have been overwhelmed by the amount of patients they were seeing or affected by the pandemic in other ways,” said Sifuentes.

SAH’s investment into quality and staying close to its mission and values resulted in the organization being better prepared than most. Ensuring the right staff were in place — with a total commitment to serving marginalized communities — was critical for SAH to maneuver through this era.

Future Goals

One of the primary goals of SAH Community Wellness is to expand their reach to provide quality health care for everyone. This involves changing the image of SAH from one that not only serves socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, but also delivers the best quality of care. SAH also is looking to expand its influence on affecting policy change. Through sharing its best practices on serving minority communities impacted by racial inequities, Sifuentes hopes that his organization can educate the country on systematic levers that are keeping communities in poverty.

“When you look at our patient quality numbers for Medicaid and Medicare, you’ll find that we are in the top 10 hospitals for total hospital performance in the state of Illinois — not just safety net, but across the board. It’s an incredible testament of the commitment of our clinicians to the organization and the ability to serve our community outside the walls of the hospital,” concluded Sifuentes.

Sources

1. “Is 60623 the Best Illinois Zip Code for Your Business?” Illinois Outline, www.illinois-demographics.com/60623-demographics.
2. “COVID Daily Dashboard.” City of Chicago : Latest Data, City of Chicago, 09 July 2020, www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/covid-19/home/latest-data.html.