

Key Strategies to Meet Growing Behavioral Health Needs



Across the nation, communities are experiencing drastic spikes in a variety of behavioral health issues, including anxiety and depression, as people continue to navigate the complexities and stressors brought on by the pandemic. **These spikes are extensions of an ongoing crisis in behavioral health globally, and are not expected to decrease once COVID-19 subsides.**¹

More than 190 million Americans, or 58% of the population, have at least one medical comorbidity, while more than 30 million have three or more. Further, it is expected that people living with multiple comorbidities will more than double by 2050. Of those experiencing at least one comorbidity, nearly 70% also have a behavioral health disorder.² These statistics highlight the growing need for behavioral health program integration into a hospital's continuum of care, as many of the patients currently being treated are left undiagnosed. Further, the lack of behavioral health access can hinder a patient's ability to receive the best care for both their physical and mental needs.

The consequences of not having a dedicated behavioral health program can lead to detrimental losses for a health system, and most importantly, the community it serves – especially as these mental health struggles can lead to overdose, suicide or premature death. Moreover, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. and the second overall cause of death for individuals between the ages of 15 and 24.³

Read this guide to learn about the issues leading to an influx of behavioral health patients and the three key areas hospitals are addressing to efficiently and effectively meet the growing population.

The Current Strain on Health Systems

One in five U.S. adults, or 47.6 million people, experience mental illness each year.⁴ As of 2017, at least 300 million people across the world were struggling with depression, 284 million with anxiety and more than 178 million with alcohol or drug addiction.¹

As these numbers rise year over year, hospitals and health systems continue to be the safety net for behavioral healthcare – especially when community-

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based services are inadequately resourced. This can cause patients who are experiencing chronic behavioral health disorders to seek care in hospitals not properly suited to provide this type of treatment.⁵

To efficiently address these issues, health systems are increasing access to this vital treatment through community partnerships, integration of physical and behavioral healthcare in primary care settings, and re-examining the role of emergency departments (EDs) in an effort to alleviate current strains on staff and facility operations as well as reduce care costs.

In order to meet the growing needs of the behavioral health population, health systems must first address:

1 Workforce Development

Research surrounding behavioral health is still emerging, so it can become difficult for hospitals to locate proper education and training for staff members that will help them effectively treat behavioral health disorders. This issue can hinder a hospital's ability to recommend the most beneficial form of treatment, as they are often unclear about the actions needed to address behavioral health.

Compounding this problem is a workforce without enough psychiatrists, counselors and other clinical staff to fully meet the increasing demand for these services. **An analysis from the Kaiser Family Foundation found that the U.S. as a whole was only fulfilling around 44% of its total need for mental healthcare professionals, and an additional 3,300 would be needed to eliminate the shortage.**⁶

Employing highly-trained and educated behavioral health experts, in addition to a dedicated behavioral health department, will help address the growing patient population. Employing these experts also benefits the entire hospital, as behavioral health and rehabilitation collaboration can aid in early identification and treatment of behavioral health needs across all care settings⁷ – opening the door to patients with physical rehabilitative needs who could benefit from behavioral health services.

However, successful integration of behavioral and physical health services requires cultural shifts. In addition to embedding a psychologist or mental health professional within a medical unit, a hospital must also take into account the necessary collaboration between behavioral health specialists and the rest of the interdisciplinary team of physicians and therapists. This approach has been shown to positively impact those with both physical and mental rehabilitation needs.

Once workforce development concerns are addressed, it opens the door to a more accessible form of care.

2 Enhanced Patient Access to Behavioral Health Services

In addition to the lack of behavioral health workforce available to serve this growing population, the lack of accessibility to these programs and services continues to take a toll on communities across the country.

In these shortage areas, the ED is utilized as a patient's primary form of behavioral healthcare, forcing many patients to wait for hours or even days to access an appropriate inpatient psychiatric bed. **Research has found that approximately one in eight ED visits involve behavioral health conditions - increasing more than 44% between 2006 and 2017, with suicidal thoughts growing 415%.**^{5,8}

Further, this growing strain on EDs hinders their ability to serve patients outside of the behavioral health sector as bed availability continues to be pushed to capacity. As a result, hospitals and health systems are focusing on how to reduce ED overcrowding while connecting these patients with appropriate, timely care.

For areas with greater availability to behavioral health resources, increasing accessibility to this form of care has already produced a variety of benefits. For example, in an effort to reduce acute care utilization, a health system in Tennessee co-located behavioral health professionals in primary care settings to enable real-time consultations. These services included behavioral health screenings and tracking high-need patients for treatment adherence. As a result, the health system reduced ED visits by 68%, hospital care by 37% and overall costs by 22%.⁵

This has led many providers to examine the specific qualities that could enable their facilities to make these instrumental improvements to their overall performance and outcomes. There is one factor that continues to produce successful results for both a hospital and the community it serves: partnership.

3 Optimize Your Behavioral Health Services Through Partnership

In the past, healthcare consumers typically interacted with the health system only when they were sick or injured; however, a recent Deloitte article has predicted that more health spend will be devoted to sustaining well-being and preventing illness by 2040, while less will be tied to assessing conditions and treating illness.⁹ Optimizing a hospital to provide this more comprehensive form of care can present a multitude of challenges if not properly addressed and handled by an industry expert and trusted partner.

Another factor influencing the shift to well-being and prevention treatment is the fact that direct and indirect

costs of behavioral illness are estimated to total up to 4% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), exceeding the burden of cancer, diabetes and respiratory disease combined. **Therefore, if the behavioral health crisis is not adequately addressed, it is projected that the U.S. will experience a \$16 trillion negative impact on the global economy from 2020–2030¹** – causing a substantial increase in annual excess healthcare costs and patient lengths of stay in an inpatient setting.⁶

Further, health systems have already seen initial financial implications brought on by the pandemic as one recent U.S. study reported the negative behavioral health impacts from COVID-19 rose from 32% to 53% between March and July 2020.¹

It is also important to understand that as the healthcare landscape evolves to serve this population, the determinant of services provided will shift from the provider to the consumer. This major shift makes it all the more important to stand out in the behavioral health sector – leading many providers to outsource their current or potential behavioral health services to an industry expert to help ensure behavioral health service integration is streamlined with their existing hospital operations.



Benefits of Partnership with Kindred Behavioral Health

While the need is great, running a successful behavioral health program is complex and requires specialized expertise that differs from the rest of a hospital's core competencies. Having a partner with focused behavioral health expertise can benefit hospitals by alleviating the burden of implementing and optimizing a successful behavioral health program. However, one size does not fit all for behavioral health needs. Having a partner that can customize a solution to meet a hospital's unique needs, while also adjusting to the hospital's mission

and values, is vital for overall program and partnership success.

By addressing these needs, health systems can not only face/take on/tackle a pressing social challenge, but also improve patient outcomes, reduce costs and create a happier and healthier community.

Kindred Behavioral Health (KBH), a service line of Kindred, is a leader in treating patients with mental health and substance use disorders through partnerships that integrate the latest innovative solutions – producing quality care and superior outcomes.

Discover how Kindred Behavioral Health can help prepare your hospital for the growing patient population and how partnership with a behavioral health expert can offer superior long-term benefits. For more information, visit [KindredBehavioralHealth.com](https://www.kindredbehavioralhealth.com).

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