

MH Deputy Administrator says community input is key in planning services

Vera Zanders, Deputy Administrator for the Office of Mental Health, was the guest speaker at the December CSP meeting. She talked about the importance of CSP and how the feedback from CSP impacts the work that the Montgomery County Office of Mental Health (OMH) does.

Zanders said the county doesn't plan services without getting feedback from the community. For example, a survey went out last year that the county organized with CSP to get people's feedback about what priorities the OMH should focus on. This information was incorporated into the Annual Plan that the OMH does every year. The five priorities identified by CSP during the last survey were housing, peer support, career & education support, crisis, and treatment.

Here are some questions from CSP members and answers from the Deputy Administrator:

Does the Office of Mental Health get involved with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)?

Yes, Career Centers refer people to OVR when that's appropriate.

Does treatment mean traditional treatment or also alternative treatment?

The office does want to focus on evidenced based treatment, and they also want to offer opportunities for alternatives, including peer support groups, such as Alternatives to Suicide.

Residential treatment – a person was concerned about how people are admitted into a residential program, and worries about feeling unsafe. How can CSP impact that?

CSP has identified residential as a priority, and so the county has looked at how to have residential programs better meet individual's needs. Vera recommended that people talk to staff at residential programs about their safety concerns. Also, the county funds advocacy, so if you want to talk to an advocate to talk through options, including how to talk to staff, you can contact the Community Advocates.

How does the county help people go from interdependence to independent living?

The county recently went through a "residential transformation" to help residential programs support people to move into more independent living, or not go into residential programs if they don't need them. *Feedback came from CSP members that programs should encourage, not pressure, and recognize that people have anxiety. Vera said that the county encourages programs to "walk beside" the people they are supporting, not pushing them or leading them.

There was a suggestion to put together a program that matches homeowners with empty bedrooms, especially those trying to pay a mortgage, with people who are looking for a space in the community to live affordably.

Vera replied that that was a very good suggestion and said that she would explore that idea. *How can we follow up?* Tracey Riper-Thomas and Erin Hewitt come to all the CSP meetings and the county staff meetings always include CSP updates on the agenda. CSP will follow up with Tracey and Erin at future meetings.

Is there support with helping people figure out what kind of work they can do?

Vera said that there are Career Centers in every area of the county that can help – these centers provide support for education and employment.

Are there new initiatives?

One of the biggest challenges has been that there has been no increase to the mental health budget since 2007, which means that for every dollar that we had in 2007, we have 23 cents less in spending power in 2019, because expenses go up, they do not stay the same (electric costs more, rent costs more, etc.) If you see this as an issue, Vera encourages you to talk to your legislators around this issue, because hearing about the impact of this funding challenge from the people it effects is important. CSP had suggestions to do big fundraising to bring in more funding, and to put together a form letter to send to members to send to their legislators. Vera said that the county can't do fundraising, but individual organizations do fundraise. The committee discussed the possibility of organizing an over-arching fundraising effort to fund all services.

Question about how long can a person receive support, like if they lose Medicaid?

The county uses braided funding from different sources so that they can provide support to individuals when they need it, whatever their insurance or Medicaid/Medicare status is. Housing is one of the biggest challenges, as mental health funding isn't technically for housing, but housing stability is an important factor in mental health, so the county has worked to fund subsidized housing for people wherever they have opportunity to do so.

How does a permanent subsidy work and how do you qualify?

The Housing Authority has forty non-elderly disabled (NED) vouchers for the county and a limited number of other vouchers, so it is very challenging. Tim Pirog and the Fair Housing Rights organization will be speaking at a future CSP meeting, and will have more answers to CSP questions.

What can this committee do?

Vera said that local state legislators and the governor need to hear from people from this committee, that there have been no COLAs since 2007 and this has impacted services. Again there was a suggestion from the committee that we develop a form letter that we can email to members to send to legislators.

The committee thanked Vera for coming.