

Community-based programs help mentally ill achieve stability, improve quality of life

Two community-based initiatives launched by the Alexian Brothers Center for Mental Health (ABCMH) are helping people with mental illnesses enhance their relationships, improve their quality of life, and in some cases, reintegrate into the community. The initiatives include an innovative day-hospitalization program that provides intensive psychiatric support and counseling five days a week in a community setting, and a unique partnership with nursing-home operators that offers ongoing medical psychotherapy for residents.

The day-hospitalization program treats people struggling with acute psychiatric symptoms, helping them avoid an inpatient hospital stay, says Scott Burgess, ABCMH Executive Director. Community mental health centers rarely offer such programs. The ABCMH program is the only one of its kind in Illinois, and one of only a handful nationwide. Two psychiatrists provide psychiatric evaluations and medication management for clients, and two licensed clinical professional counselors provide individual, group and family counseling. Clients also take classes focusing on techniques for healthy living and preventing a relapse after treatment. In addition, the program offers spiritual care and roundtrip transportation for clients. Most clients stay in the program for two-to-four weeks. "The program has all the intensity of inpatient hospitalization, but clients get to go home and sleep in their own bed," Burgess says. "There also is a significant cost savings to the individual and other payors." Launched in January 2009 in a building near ABCMH's headquarters in Arlington Heights, Ill., the program had treated 80 clients through October, and Burgess expected that number to rise to more than 100 by the end of 2009. Of the initial 80, 77 had avoided inpatient hospitalization after leaving the program. Rick Germann, ABCMH Director of Operations, cites the program's community based setting as a key factor in its success.

Most day-hospitalization programs, he says, are based at inpatient facilities, which are typically much larger and can be intimidating to some patients. Patients in these programs also can be reluctant to discuss their problems openly, because they fear they will be hospitalized if they do. "Our program offers a small, calming and intimate environment where people can feel comfortable sharing their struggles and can receive highly individualized care," Germann says. Under the nursing-home partnership, an ABCMH psychiatrist and licensed clinical social worker collaborate as a team, visiting nursing homes to treat residents with mental illnesses.

Services provided include comprehensive psychiatric evaluations, ongoing medication management and group counseling focused on coping with mental illness and on healthy living habits. The program seeks to help residents improve their quality of life and social abilities, and to identify and to stabilize residents capable of reintegrating into the community

with high levels of support. "There are 18,000 mentally ill individuals in Illinois nursing homes, many of whom are there not because they medically need to be there, but because there simply is no other place for them to be," Burgess says.

Since the program began in January 2008, about 120 nursing-home residents have received care, and the program has grown to include nine Chicago-area nursing homes. Feedback from nursing-home operators and residents "has been exceptional," and 15 residents have transitioned successfully into either ABCMH's supported residential program, or government-subsidized apartments, with support from ABCMH. More information about ABCMH, and an informational video entitled "Treatment Works," can be found at www.alexiancenter.org