

# Increasing Mental Health Provider Capacity

## Initiative Summary Statement:

Increase the number of mental health providers in the region and integrate them in high-need settings, making services available to all residents during blue skies as well as during and after a disaster.

## Initiative Description:

**Objective:** This initiative will activate a region-wide, collaborative effort to increase diversification of and access to mental health providers, including those able to provide frontline screening in schools and other settings of high need. By providing more training, educational opportunities and incentives to career-seekers, the Lee County area can support a “whole family,” approach to mental health, which focuses equally and intentionally on services and opportunities for the child and the adults in their lives. Additionally, more training of front-line staff to ensure they can connect all residents in need to services can lower barriers to access and help lessen the “stigma” to seeking mental healthcare.

**Need:** Mental health in daily life, as well as during and after a disaster event, is a top concern of the County residents; the Community Health Needs Assessment, published in 2020 (pre-Ian) by the Florida Department of Health, determined that overall mental health was “Fair/Poor” in Lee County. The Assessment identifies diagnosed depression, stress, and a low mental health provider ratio as key considerations. The ratio of mental health providers is well below the rest of Florida and the nation; the Florida Department of Health (FDOH) reported that “in fiscal year 2021-2022 the rate per 100,000 of behavioral and mental health professionals in Lee County was 92.1, compared to Florida at 130.4.” In addition to a concerning lack of baseline mental wellbeing and mental health providers, hurricanes can “lead to mental disorders among previously healthy people and worsen the health of those with preexisting mental illness.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), *Hurricanes Take Heavy Toll on Mental Health of Survivors*, May 8, 2022, <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/news/hurricanes-take-heavy-toll-mental-health-survivors>.

The needs of youth present a special challenge to the region. One in six U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year, and half of all mental health conditions begin by age 14. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavior problems, anxiety, and depression are the most diagnosed mental disorders in children. Yet, about half of youth with mental health conditions received any kind of treatment in the past year.

**Regional Approach:** In the Lee County area, there are organizations already working to increase the mental health workforce. Those efforts could be further supported to achieve three important action areas: workforce and needs assessment, more training opportunities and securing more resources.

The Regional Health and Wellness Coalition is a leading forum for coordination on mental and behavioral health issues. The Coalition could be leveraged to lead a region-wide assessment of mental health services to determine the specific kinds of workers that are most needed, but in the least supply. Importantly, differences in need by jurisdiction might also need to be updated to reflect post-Hurricane Ian needs. An area of need identified by local experts includes the collection of mental health data needs for early and secondary education, inclusive of data that suggests untreated cases.

Area educational institutions, including Florida Gulf Coast University, support “micro-credentialing” – the use of certifications that reflect specific training below what is necessary to obtain a degree, but sufficient for providing needed services in the marketplace. Expanding mental health-focused micro-credentialing programs by educational institutions is a key pathway to increasing the workforce. Some of these opportunities should include working in post-disaster environments.

**Impact:** Some regions have found incentive programs to be a useful tool in bolstering the mental health workforce. A regional approach to pursuing new resources to support incentives is an important action step. Joint applications to foundations and identified state and federal opportunities is another pathway to funding. Coordinating the search for resources across jurisdictions and inclusive to organizations in both government, private and non-profit sectors can increase the likelihood of success. The development of joint proposals and pathways can also be used to support a legislative agenda that advocates for more funding in this area.

To fully integrate this workforce, Lee County Schools will plan to develop new mental health supports that increase access and reduce barriers.

## Key Considerations:

- Efforts to expand the workforce must be well-integrated with the needs of Lee County Schools and other educational institutions, and part of a plan that details how access will be provided in schools. An area school, Franklin Park Elementary School, has a pilot program for providing mental health “wrap around services” that could serve as a model.
- The post-disaster environment increases the need for mental health services. The Lee County area should develop and train a workforce that can flex to meet this need in high-risk areas.
- Workforce expansion should be closely aligned with the needs of employers and workforce housing considerations to support sustained employment in the Lee County area.
- First responders and emergency support workers can experience mental health impacts at higher rates than the traditional workforce. Ensure resources are available to response and support staff for pre-, during, and post- storm activities.

As capacity increases, the region should evaluate enhancing area navigator programs that connect residents to resources. Care Solace, a mental health care coordination service in Lee County, currently operates a navigator program that connects residents to mental health services that could be augmented as the number of workers increases.

## Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Health & Social Services, Economic Recovery

## Stakeholders:

- County departmental experts on mental health
- FutureMakers Coalition
- Lee Health
- School Districts
- Regional health and wellness groups

## Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- United States Department of Education
- United States Department of Veterans Affairs
- Florida Department of Health

- Florida Department of Children and Families
- Florida Department of Education

## Resources:

- [Community Needs Health Assessment \(2020\)](#), Florida Department of Health

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