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Mental health parity panelists: insurance is not enough

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RACINE - New federal and state legislation forces insurance companies to cover mental health services as they would other medical services.

But that's just a place to start, said panelists at a mental health parity symposium at Gateway Technical College, 1001 Main St., Tuesday morning.

"There's no one in this room that thinks simply having insurance that covers addiction and mental health is enough," said David Riemer, of Community Advocates Public Policy Institute. "It's a foundation. It's not the whole structure. What else is needed?"

Riemer said there appear to be three main places for additional work:

- There are not enough resources for people with mental health needs.
- Resources need to be available to people much earlier.
- There need to be new ways to think about interacting with people who are at-risk or diagnosed with mental health issues.

Insurance companies and public health care plans can have strict limits on the types of providers authorized to treat mental health needs. There is a shortage of psychiatrists, which leads to long wait times for people who need services, said Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare's Southeastern Wisconsin Administrative Director for Mental Health and Addiction Care Julie Hueller. She said it could help if other types of providers, like psychiatric nurse practitioners, were able to see patients as well.

Not having enough people to provide services makes it more difficult for people who need them, panelists said, but before someone can access a service, his or her needs must be evaluated.

Police officers are often the first point of evaluation for someone with mental health needs, panelists noted. Racine County Circuit Court Judge Gerald Ptacek said it would help if a mental health expert were available at the start of a situation to determine what someone's needs are.

Hueller said in the hospital system, a patient's mental health is treated differently than physical health.

"I've gotten feedback from physicians that (more strict mental health confidentiality requirements) prevent me from giving good care," she said. "We are stigmatizing our patients based on systems we have in place right now. It's the same thing with managed care firms. I can go into the emergency room and I can be having a heart attack. I can ... have my surgery and my insurance company doesn't need to know about it. If I'm suicidal, the insurance company needs to authorize treatment."

Flexibility in treatment, so people with different mental health needs can get services tailored to their situation, would also help.

Counselor and therapist Sue Panger, owner of Sue Panger & Associates, said she looks at her patients' nutrition and activity levels to try and improve their mental health outcome. She said many patients started out on medication, but were able to stop taking them as they developed more multi-faceted lives.

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