



Mental Health During the Pandemic

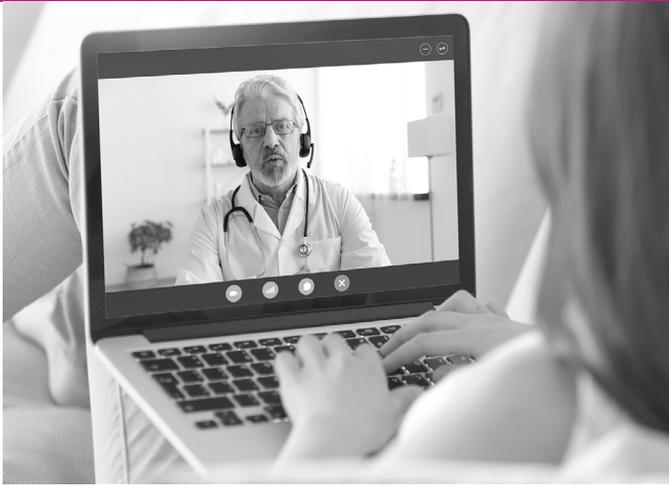
By Nicole Figles | Vice President of Population Health Management and Clinical Operation

As Nevada continues to see COVID-19 cases rise and businesses face struggles with the economy, many Nevadans are not only faced with the pandemic crisis, they are also dealing with feelings of anxiety and despair. By looking at trends in behavioral health during and post-quarantine, Nevadans can better equip themselves to face a similar situation if one should arise in the future.

One trend seen in Nevada during the height of the pandemic was a drastic decrease in individuals going into emergency rooms. According to Nicole Figles, Vice President of Population Health Management and Clinical Operations for SilverSummit Healthplan, this is likely due to the fear surrounding COVID-19. However, over the last few months, there has been an uptick in ER usage as that fear began to ease.

While the anxiety of the general population has slowly decreased and people are more willing to use services such as emergency rooms when needed, those who faced behavioral health issues prior to the pandemic still face those same issues. Figles said, “Providing resources to such individuals during the quarantine was a challenge that required innovation.” By partnering with Summit Behavioral Health, SilverSummit Healthplan was able to cut down barriers to help these vulnerable members of the community.

“Summit Behavioral Health expanded its teletherapy and telemedicine appointments week over week,” said Figles. “Since March 23rd through August 21st, its clinics performed 3,356 telemedicine appointments, and 3,500 Tele-therapy appointments.”



Teletherapy and telemedicine appointments were an integral part of reaching vulnerable populations during the past quarantine. Figles notes additional measures were taken to help with these efforts, such as increasing staff presence and hours at triage centers, providing additional safety and sobriety beds, performing outreach to members who were tested for COVID-19. In turn, providing resources to those who tested positive were all tactics Nevada Behavioral Health and SilverSummit used to help reduce the mental health strain on those facing hardships.

Although expanding behavioral health services helped some Nevadans cope with the uncertainties of COVID-19, those who face additional health issues continue to struggle on a daily basis. In particular those who abuse substances, such as drugs or alcohol, are much more difficult to treat when it comes to behavioral health.

“Many of the most vulnerable psychiatric patients are homeless or do not have access to transportation,” she noted. “They may not have an ID, income or birth certificate. There are so many components that drive the barrier for them to maintain treatment.”

Many factors contribute to an individual’s health and wellness beyond access to medical care. Socioeconomic conditions can influence health risks and outcomes. Poverty, food insecurity, housing instability, education, employment, access to transportation, and other circumstances contribute to health disparities among underserved and vulnerable populations.

Unless a healthcare provider can assist in removing these barriers, it is more challenging to get a patient to fully succeed in managing their mental health treatment. According to Figles, “Access to long-term transitional housing, as well as a team of clinicians who monitor the patient’s daily progress, is an effective solution for overcoming SDOHs.” Although there are existing state and private programs that provide these resources, further expansion is needed to continue to help these vulnerable individuals.

As for general tips to assist friends or family members who may be suffering from mental health issues, providing resources is a solid start. “Letting loved ones know you are there for them and willing to listen helps ease the anxiety caused by isolation. By assisting one another, Nevadans can ensure they are mentally prepared to face a situation like the recent pandemic.”

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Provider Relations: NVSS_ProviderRelations@SilverSummitHealthPlan.com
Contracting: NETWORKMGMTNV@SilverSummitHealthPlan.com

Mailing Address:
SilverSummit Healthplan
Attn: Provider Relations
2500 North Buffalo Drive, Ste 250
Las Vegas, NV 89128

Claims Address:
SilverSummit Healthplan
Attn: Claims
PO Box 5090
Farmington MO 63640-5090