



Mental Health, Substance Use and Homelessness

SEPTEMBER 30, 2022

FINAL REPORT

COMPILATION STATEMENT
SOUTHWEST ARIZONA TOWN HALL FORUM
MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE AND HOMELESSNESS
SEPTEMBER 30, 2022

Mental health, Substance Use and Homelessness are intertwined with their impact on our population. The Southwest Arizona Town Hall (SWATH) held on September 30, 2022, at the Yuma Regional Medical Center Administration area focused on each area during breakout sessions, and prioritized early action plans with leveraged partnerships.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is not a situation where you can give a pill to someone, and the problem goes away. It is a continuum of care. There are many challenges that face mental health care in Yuma County:

- The stigma involved with admitting a need for these services
- A significant lack of services for the general population, which reaches a severe level when considering certain populations, such as veterans, teenagers, the elderly, and children
- Insurance coverage for mental health issues
- Mental health service outreach to our region's large minority population that is culturally and linguistically appropriate.

There is a stigma with our population in admitting a need for mental health services. Intensive public outreach campaigns to stop the stigma around mental health are required. This outreach and mental health programs need to consider cultural, generational and linguistic considerations when preparing providers and determining types of providers necessary to work with our population.

Educating the community will help our community understand what is involved and what resources exist for all ages. Removing the stigma of mental health issues and developing the skills for individuals to self-evaluate or assist those around them is needed. Funding for these services is needed. It is important for families to have the education to recognize issues and the knowledge of what to do.

In the process of public outreach, both the stigma and education on available services needs to be addressed. Individuals do not want to be labeled. The emphasis needs to be on creating a safe space to discuss the issues big or small that everyone is facing. Developing a trust in system providers is essential. Recent legislation (HB2161) has made anonymity in the school system much more difficult. Teenagers are concerned that any problems they share will be communicated to their parents, which could make their living situations more difficult.

Covering mental health services for all ages is crucial. Mental health care can be very expensive. It is difficult to find coverage for different mental health populations in Yuma County, forcing families to travel out of town to search for needed services. Teenagers receiving out-of-town services have their lives disrupted, exacerbating their mental health condition, since they are taken out of their school and community. An expansion of Level 2 services for teenagers in Yuma County would be optimal. The current situation sees teenage mental health issues tying into other issues, including those of dropping out of school and substance use. The elderly population represents a growing segment of the population, in desperate need for services, with families that do not know how to help them. There is a lack of services for the specific needs of veterans.

Insurance coverage for mental health is a difficult path that most users do not know how to navigate. The lack of insurance can prove to be a huge obstacle to obtaining service. There is a great need for more local resources that accept all the necessary forms of insurance and ensure access to individuals. Wrap-around programs need to be available to continue progress made during treatment.

Yuma County is located on the U.S./Mexico border and includes a population that is linguistically and culturally diverse. Family is the cornerstone of our area. Policies and programs need to take into consideration the whole family/community that the individual is part of to ensure the health and support for the entirety of the family unit.

We do have programs that are in place and ongoing in our Yuma community. There is a need to prioritize outreach and deeper information to the community about the services available. Crane Elementary School District is one example of a program with social workers who hold group therapy sessions at school to help young students learn how to deal with issues throughout their lives. There are also school-based resources at the high schools that are available at no charge, but parents do not always know of these services. Yuma Union High School District supports the Yellow Ribbon groups, which provide peer support for students and are present in each high school.

Specifically, information needs to be provided to general health/support providers as to where and what the available services are to more adequately provide the necessary referrals, such as a mental health navigator. Such referrals also need to be available in Spanish and in multiple formats – online as well as by phone and in person. Hotlines for mental health assistance have been successful. Early identification of mental health issues can help with early intervention to help people. Referral systems need to have follow-through to ensure continuity of services. There should be advocacy to our elected officials for the awareness and need of funding for these services.

When building these programs, we need to ensure that we are building the bridges necessary to care for those who need assistance now. Funding programs is always an issue. To make programs effective long-term, we need to consider retaining mental health professionals through competitive salaries and leveraging the benefits of becoming part of the Yuma community. Burn-out of health care professionals is of great concern and we need to look for ways to combat professionals leaving this field.

“Growing our own” services should be a priority. A welcomed program is the Yuma Regional Medical Center psychiatry residency program. As part of the development of

this system and the education of new professionals, we need to look at our existing educational opportunities. By working with the universities, Arizona Western College, Yuma Union High School District, Southwest Technical Education District of Yuma (STEDY), Yuma Regional Medical Center and local agencies, we can develop the curriculum, programs and degrees needed to support the mental health system we create. It is also important to take advantage of the talent that already exists in our community, “Growing our Own” – creating and developing pipelines to the mental health profession. Scholarship opportunities are needed to provide interested individuals assistance to follow mental health careers. Expanding partnerships in education can be accomplished through career exploration and linking with companies in this field for job creation and systematic follow-up. Stackable credentials for students can ease their career path as could highlighting what mental health professions do.

Information sharing should be streamlined for more coordination and continuation of care and the ability to track care and follow-up. This relieves the stress and pressure that might be placed on the patient or their family. It also allows providers to understand needs and evaluate services provided.

Besides working with existing university and collegiate partners, we should look outside of the State of Arizona for best practices and programs that are effective in other areas. All populations, specifically minorities and age groups, need to be brought into the decision-making process. We should do a full inventory of what parts of the system are already in place and determine where gaps exist and how those gaps can be filled. A large part of that system evaluation will be talking to those directly impacted – patients and their families. It will also require meaningful discussion and coordination between AHCCCS, court systems, law enforcement, the medical community and schools – preschool to college.

Agency cross-training can help with coordination of referrals, services, and care. Programs need to consider ways to spread training to the wider community with those who can assist with mental health issues beyond those who are specifically health providers/social workers. Education of individuals who might make that first contact is essential: parents, caretakers, teachers, general practice physicians, pediatricians, law enforcement, religious leaders, and local agency providers. Police coordination with social workers to assess mental health problems on the street could help. By educating first contacts (parents and caretakers, teachers, law enforcement, clergy, court systems), we would be able to identify those in crisis or need, capture needed and necessary information and direct them to the best services.

In particular, coordination of care with mental health services is crucial. A one-stop center would be helpful. There needs to be quality, availability and accessibility of services for our population. Transportation to services in Yuma County is a prevailing issue and options to reach services need to be considered. Providing virtual as well as in-person care is needed, as is expansion of services that provide local services, evaluations for mental health needs and assisting the transition from in-patient to out-patient care. Evaluation of care through patient surveys is important.

We care about the needs of our population in Yuma County. By working together, we can help those in need and provide mental health services and education to all our population.

PRIORITIZATION OF MENTAL HEALTH

Vision (Action: Yuma Regional Medical Center/Dr. Magu)

- Engagement of members (80%)
- Reduced duplication of resources/services
- Communication – news

Action Plan

- Website – central source of information and services by December 2023
 - Host first meeting by November 30, 2022
 - Inventory of services/resources
 - Create a set of standard metrics/database by June, 2023
-
- Coordination of Care
 - Access and Coordination of Behavioral Health
 - Form an active coalition
 - Awareness Education
 - Increase pipeline for healthcare professionals

Mental Health Priorities for Yuma County

Preventive Outreach/Insurance Coverage for families and children

Service Outreach (make services known)

Community Education – one stop shop (bring resources together)

Expansion of Systems

Education (community, development of professionals)

Reduce stigma, normalize care

Health literacy

Funding

Infrastructure

Expansion of high-level and mid-level treatment facilities

Recruitment of properly trained mental health professionals, and support workers with lived experience

Expansion of peer support groups

Education, Schools and Community

Prioritize drug prevention.

Early and regular screenings for mental health concerns.

Integration between current support systems.

Leverage and build partnerships in Yuma County (Information into the schools and community about costs, risks and avoiding substance use.)

Financial Support for Treatment

Address financial barriers

Community funding and collaboration

Social media

Grants

Partnerships

Coalitions

Local multilingual intensive outreach and education program.

Expanding system that provides local services

Coordination of care through consortium for mental health services available in Yuma County.

Coordination of Care

Addressing the people's needs

Quality and availability of service

Distribution of resources available to the community

Create an active consortium for mental health (set an action plan and do a community needs assessment)

Expansion of formal education for healthcare awareness

Partner with all levels of education

Partner with agencies and employers

SUBSTANCE USE

We are experiencing a crisis; a crisis that needs to be brought to the forefront. In general society, substance use has been desensitized. However, substances - readily available on the street, at home and at school - can cause death. The presence of fentanyl, which is accessible and affordable, is growing substantially higher in Yuma County since it is being laced within other drugs. Although fentanyl is currently receiving much public attention, Yuma County has an equally large problem with methamphetamine. Vaping substances on school campuses are present during the day in the restrooms. There is denial on the individual, parent, and caretaker level that a substance use problem exists.

Challenges involved with substance use share many issues that are also present with mental health: the stigma for individuals or their family members to admit problems with substance use; education of the community about substance use; individual trust levels in existing medical and assistance systems; insurance coverage of the cost associated with substance use issues; and community outreach on resources available to address substance use.

There is significant stigma with conversations about substance use. Parents are afraid to talk about substance use. However, substance use may be considered normal at home, so children don't see its use as being wrong. Pain management is an aspect of self-medication that is readily available and seen as normal. Media entertainment and social activities may present substance use as a fun and social activity to the general population. Youth are seeking meaningful connections and when they don't find it or seek peer acceptance, they may find or rely on substances.

Sharing information about resources on substance use is important. Preventive measures will help our population to help solve problems before they escalate to a higher level. However, there is still stigma affiliated with substance use issues. Methamphetamine and fentanyl use are very prevalent in our community. Unfortunately, this substance use can reach a level where it escalates and disrupts people's lives.

One of the most important and meaningful ways to address substance use is to focus on prevention – educating children and teenagers about the risks and impacts of substance abuse and also educating parents and caretakers on the signs of substance abuse and the resources that are available. Education needs to occur on a community-wide basis, not just in schools, and at all age levels. We can capitalize on existing education programs and curriculum to develop those resources for educators. We can also utilize students that are motivated to help educate others on substance use and prevention to help promote and facilitate such education.

There needs to be more sharing of lived life experience on substance use with our community so that everyone realizes how substance use affects everyone, from all walks of life.

A media campaign about the current risks and dangers would be impactful and would help educate adults about these issues. Such a campaign would help address parent and caretaker denial. The campaign could also be used to educate the public about resources available in our community.

Providing education on substance use may not have the results desired. Being around a particular environment can strongly influence someone to use substances. While education programs are beneficial, they have to overcome the barrier of being dismissed by those who are targeted for the program. These education programs must begin with the family because often aspects within home life lead to the introduction of substances.

By developing coping skills at an early age, individuals can feel prepared to not use substances. Prioritizing substance prevention education in schools, both in English and Spanish, can help. Nevertheless, there is peer pressure, very prevalent at certain ages that can influence people to use substances. There is also the presence of substances at family members' houses that are readily available. Previous programs, such as the DARE program, have not always had successful results. Peer groups, such as Smart Recovery and Al Anon, could also help with substance use since many times family members do not know how to support others with usage issues.

Often, substance use occurs in connection or correlation with trauma, grief and loss, or other mental health issues; it may even become the catalyst. Underlying issues should be studied since substance use may be a symptom of another issue. Services can assist individuals and need to continue to support those who do get clean and need assistance in continuing their sobriety path.

Insurance coverage is difficult to navigate. Without coverage, assistance with substance use can be expensive. For those who don't have AHCCCS, there should be services readily available that do not have a high cost. There are grants available that cover the commercial insurance side. However, many of these grants require that they be referred by the school system.

There are almost no adolescent drug treatment options in Yuma County. There is a great need for more local resources that accept all the necessary forms of insurance and ensure access to individuals. To improve the situation, we need to not only consider local residential treatment, but we also need to ensure there are wrap-around programs to continue the progress made during treatment so that it can carry through. Even for adults there are limited and sporadic resources available.

Navigating the health care system is not easy. Helping individuals through a one-stop shop can integrate working with individuals who have both mental health and substance use since both issues tend to go together.

It takes a village, comprised of many organizations, to do outreach on preventive measures for substance use.

Social media has a high impact on people. Presentations that are given at school may not reach the target audience that needs to be reached about substance use. Smaller group discussions on drug prevention could have more of a relevant impact.

The crisis itself needs to be brought to the forefront. A media campaign about the current risks and dangers would be impactful and would help educate adults about these issues. Such a campaign would help address parent and caretaker denial. The campaign could also be used to educate the public about resources available in our community.

System Change

Criteria that require individuals to be clean for a period of time before they can benefit from resources need to change. People need to be helped right away.

There need to be confidential ways for individuals to reach out for assistance and help for a friend or family members. The Yellow Ribbon group is a way for high school students to help others.

We need to work on connecting medical providers to agencies that provide substance use services. Finding and training individuals to be outreach specialists would go far in helping create those connections and also educating the public about existing resources.

Our community needs detox or inpatient centers, outreach specialists that can help connect agencies and providers, and a resource communication platform. In addition, our drug court currently only assists those with felony charges – it should include a program for misdemeanor charges.

Just like mental health, we need to develop career pathways that lead to jobs in the field of substance use prevention and care. We can leverage the work that will be done in the mental health field. This will also help in addressing the impacts of staff turnover in local agencies.

Leveraging and building partnerships in Yuma County are essential. Partnerships with law enforcement and health care professionals with schools should be leveraged to get information into schools about the costs and risks of substance use.

To serve our community, it is necessary to fund and build needed infrastructure for rehabilitation and mental health that includes support for those with substance use disorders; in particular, help with navigating the health care system. There needs to be a holistic system in place instead of individuals treated on a piecemeal basis. Facilities with high-level in-patient and mid-level transitional treatment need to be expanded. There needs to be an expansion of treatment service facilities throughout the county, including pediatric support programs. Community members should meet with legislators to obtain funding for program support.

The recruitment and development of properly trained mental health professionals need to occur. Those individuals who have lived experience and have become clean and sober could be recruited to follow careers that help others with substance use disorders.

Financial barriers and insurance issues for coverage need to be addressed for substance use disorders. Communities could collaborate to obtain grants, non-traditional partnerships, and coalitions, to support work being done and the work that is still needed.

Drug prevention education in our schools and within our region needs to be prioritized, applied with cultural considerations of this area, and available in both English and Spanish.

Legislation must not prevent local school systems from educating students on substance use (HB2161). The focus should be on helping young people rather than disciplining them. Our community should instill understanding and compassion with issues and encourage community service, rather than only punitive measures.

We need integration between current support systems to serve our community, which will build rapport, and encourage services to complement each other and not duplicate efforts. Expanding coalitions within our community can assist with sharing ideas and providing resources. Town halls that are focused on substance use can provide opportunities for our community to engage in this issue and interact.

PRIORITIZATION FOR SUBSTANCE USE

Vision

Action: Yuma County Anti-Drug Coalition

- Reduced youth drug use in Yuma County (reduced school suspensions for drug use and reduced law enforcement incidences due to drug within 18 months)
- Train teachers and school staff on drug awareness
- Educate parents and caregivers
- Media campaign (all channels)
- Town hall meetings at schools and community settings

Community awareness/social media

Safe place/zone for confidential discussions

Leverage/coordinate resources and relationships

Community collaboration to gain more funding for high level treatment and long-term tradition programs

Prioritize drug prevention education in our schools and support families including funding for such programs.

Continue to work on a holistic system instead of piecemeal for services provided.

Fund and build necessary infrastructure for rehabilitation and mental health.

Address financial barriers and insurance.

Community collaboration to gain more funding for high-level treatment and long-term treatment programs

Prioritize drug prevention education in our schools and support families including funding for such programs.

Continue to work on a holistic system instead of piecemeal for service provided

Personal statements of action

SWATH PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Prioritize drug prevention education by informing students and parents at school campaigns, public events, and providing information.

Prioritize drug education. Coordinate all organizations to increase community education, peer-to-peer education in work on awareness.

My goal is to educate Yuma County on the perils of substance abuse from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Community participation at school and small community grassroots teams/schools. Firsthand experience and testimonials and testimonial experience of lost loved ones.

My goal is multi-level education programs directed at students and their parents on the hazards, identification and consequences of drug use. Multi-level targeting of young adults and parents. Multimedia approach. Organize students against drug abuse in middle and high schools.

My goal is to prioritize drug prevention education through young serving organizations who provide services to schools and community (CSF, YCHO, YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, coalitions, juvenile centers) to begin implementation of services with community support.

My goal is to prioritize drug prevention education; to fund and build necessary infrastructure for rehab and mental health to address financial barriers and insurance. Create awareness presentations to parents in schools and/or public venues and provide them with statistics of drug use, overdoses, factors that contribute to substance use, and how to help their kids with resources in the community.

My goal is to prioritize drug prevention education by using social media to spread information, having speakers go to schools, having conferences that parents can attend, and beginning to expose drug education to kids at younger ages.

My goal is to prioritize drug prevention education by using billboards, guest speakers, using social media, and organizing a citywide rally.

My goal is to prioritize drug prevention education by getting students involved in awareness.

My goal is to prevent the use/misuse of substances through education to both adults and youth by collaborating with agencies that offer education.

My goal is to educate and raise awareness on substance abuse through social media, parenting education, youth education and partnership with local agencies.

My goal is to prioritize drug prevention education by passing information to the schools, going into agencies to promote recovery, providing information to the community, partnering with agencies, having communication meetings and educating myself to educate others.

My goal is prevention and education in schools and the community through social media campaigns, bridges resources into the schools, developing training for faculty, expanding billboard campaigns, getting literature posters out in the community, and developing a youth coalition.

My goal is drug prevention education through speaking to schools and parents.

My goal is to increase education and awareness surrounding us, stigma, treatment and resources to schools and community through partnering with schools to provide education, partnering with agencies to provide community training, and utilizing support groups and education facilities to carry out this message.

My goal is to prioritize drug prevention education through college level prevention and strategy sessions for education students.

My goal is to prioritize substance abuse/use prevention education through developing afterschool programs for children, integrating educational seminars and assessing the community and educating.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness in Yuma County affects everyone. There is no particular population nor age group that does not experience homelessness. Yuma County has initiatives to help with housing. However, housing inventory and funding is very limited. People may have vouchers for housing but cannot find housing. Housing vouchers may not cover the current cost of housing.

There are many buckets for housing for different groups: the mentally ill, substance users, etc. Difficulties arise for coordination of care and continuing to have housing provided. Keeping people housed is difficult.

Housing overall is hard to come by in Yuma County which means that those who do qualify for services or at risk for homelessness can't find the necessary housing to prevent homelessness. We are currently failing to adequately support those coming off services and transitioning them to self-sustainment.

Homelessness affects our students. Situations such as foster care can move students to another school, which is disruptive. The lack of inventory of housing also escalates this situation. These situations can also lead to issues regarding mental health and substance use. While the school system is designed to be a safe place for students, the lack of resources in their lives can disrupt their environment and lead to problems in their lives.

High school students in Yuma County may live with family members or friends, but without a permanent home address. College students may have federal financial aid, but the funds received would not cover housing as well. There may be an opportunity for students to talk with other students to help them with housing issues and do outreach with resources. It is essential to be approachable for students to feel confident and safe to speak with someone in authority. If private information is shared, it could worsen a student's life at home.

The elderly population has a big issue with affordable housing. Those on a fixed income are in shelters because they cannot afford the cost of housing at its current rate in Yuma County.

Transitional houses are utilized for the population that have transitioned from incarceration. These places are regularly full and cannot admit anyone else.

H2A workers require employers to provide housing and properties that used to be rental properties for families are no longer available since they have been acquired for these workers. During the produce season, it is very difficult to find housing. Since Yuma County is on the border, there is housing for H2A workers that may not be occupied due to federal law. This housing could be utilized for other individuals in need.

Stakeholders

Crossroads Mission is a presence in our area for those experiencing homelessness and provides help with resources. Building partnerships to create more living spaces is needed in Yuma County. Western Arizona Council of Governments (WACOG), is a possibility for partnership since they work with a population that needs housing. Transitional Living Center Recovery also provides housing. Arizona Community Foundation is present in rural areas and can partner on this topic. Yuma Regional Medical Center is another potential partner. There are elderly patients who have been dropped off by their family and the hospital is told their family can no longer care for them. There are also those who do self-harm who are housed in the hospital. Homeless in our area also are housed in prison. The Arizona Long Term Care program is another partner that helps those in need of housing.

Other partners Yuma works with to combat homelessness include shelters, rapid rehousing and programs through the Housing Coalition of Yuma. The need is to work toward better identifying underlying issues causing homelessness for individuals, specifically mental health and substance use. We need to include services to combat these underlying issues and support family members before these issues create homelessness. Once individuals suffering from mental illness are homeless, we need to attempt to meet them where they are. Mobile mental health services are needed.

Obtaining a list of the organizations participating in this SWATH forum and what they provide would be very helpful to move forward with knowing who provides what in Yuma County, such as a resource guide for services provided. First Things First provides a resource guide for Yuma County for needed resources for children 0-5 years old.

Initiatives

Tackling homelessness should be a coordinated effort led by a coalition of entities that already provide some source of housing assistance. The Yuma Coalition to End Homelessness already exists, but it may need to be supported and propped up by those local entities so that we can address overall needs of the community. In addition to strengthening or restructuring the Coalition, we can expand on existing housing assistance programs through local agencies. Depending on the Coalition's mission and/or resources, a separate coalition may need to be created to fully address the needs of the community.

We need more job training opportunities for our homeless community. Organizations such as Arizona@Work, Regional Center for Border Health, and Crossroads Mission are currently offering these services. We need to get higher education involved to offer more certifications.

Partnerships should be developed between Crossroads Mission, city government, county government, Safe House, school districts, Yuma Regional Medical Center, Yuma County Intergovernmental Public Transportation (YCAT), Western Arizona Council of Governments (WACOG), Salvation Army, Regional Center for Border Health, and churches. The business community should also be involved, possibly through the Chamber of Commerce. Yuma Coalition to End Homelessness, ACHIEVE Human

Services, Yuma Community Food Bank, Amberley's Place, Catholic Charities, Transitional Living Center Recovery, Oxford House, HOPE Center, Union Pacific, Victory Outreach, and National Community Health Partners also represent potential partners. Homeowners with multiple properties could increase rental availability. Investors are needed to build properties to fill federal assistance housing programs.

The homeless population is a part of our community and should be provided the opportunities and resources that are needed to increase quality of life. Individuals and families should be able to go to one place for all of their needs - a central access point to support services. Housing assistance should use the "Housing First Model" and provide wrap around services. Supporting homeless requires a holistic support system that includes housing, case management, life skills training, and more.

We need to expand our understanding of who is classified as homeless, specifically needing to consider those who simply stay with different sets of family and friends. Limiting access to services to only those who are actually sleeping on the street, prevents services to those in need. Definitions of "homeless" are compounded by the stigma of homelessness, which prevent families and individuals from seeking services out that are available.

Our regional approach to homelessness is strained. Crossroads Mission has taken on a big role in supporting our local homeless population, but they are filling up and not able to fully support at their current capacity.

Homeless find public spaces appealing because they can just be. For example, local parks have had to close earlier, and drug use is happening in public bathrooms, while families are in close proximity. Local police have had to do more monitoring of these public spaces.

The easing of panhandling laws and restrictions has made it more lucrative for homeless residents to stay homeless and not seek local support services.

We have a real need for affordable housing throughout Yuma County. Finding a rental has become difficult. There is a lack of available affordable homes and apartments, and rent is increasing while family income (payroll, public assistance, Social Security) stays the same. This is leading families to become homeless if they do not have the resources to afford or find a rental.

PRIORITIZATION FOR HOMELESSNESS

Vision (Action: Yuma Coalition to End Homelessness)

- Central Access Center – planning and development
- Grant and resource development
- Communication plan/completion of website
- Larger community meeting (SWATH to assist)

Prioritize drug prevention through community education in messaging and campaigning to assist with unblocking federal and state of Arizona restrictions through District representatives and legislators involved.

Integration of current support system

Coalition within the community to form the group to provide resources – town halls focused on the issue and action items

Role modeling concept to allow visitors to share their clean and sober

Meet with legislators to help fund and continue organization

Fund and build the NEC infrastructure and program

Collaborations with law enforcement, church, healthcare, and academics to advocate to state and federal entities

Build on Yuma's Coalition to End Homelessness (all agencies involved)

Create central access location facility under one roof

Create one place where people can go for services

Build awareness

Affordable housing

Assistance Programs (rental)

Regulate fentanyl increases

Rapid re-housing

Redefine homelessness beyond those living on the street to include those in unstable housing.

Identify the population and underlying reasons including mental health issues

Provide services where the homeless are location to treat underlying issues

Yuma County is known for its collaboration. We can work together to provide solutions to these issues.

Southwest Arizona Town Hall
Mental Health in our Community
May 20, 2022

Question 1

What barriers do people face in addressing mental health needs in our community community(ies)?

For each barrier – what solutions come to mind?

There are many barriers that people face in the Yuma County area. The core barriers to those addressing mental health needs in Yuma County are a lack of local services, both direct and supporting. Services such as transportation, the cost of services and dealing with insurance/ referral requirements, plus the stigma around mental illness are challenging. Key populations that face barriers in the Yuma community are young people and senior populations.

The first hurdle facing those addressing mental health needs is overcoming the stigma of mental illness and needing mental health services. Unfortunately, many individuals who are suffering are afraid to reach out since they don't have anyone to talk with about their issues and they don't want to go through this trauma alone. In particular, it is important to overcome the stigma before acute inpatient services are needed. To assist in overcoming this, programs such as the Yellow Ribbon program and other programs within our schools provide the safe space necessary to acknowledge the need for mental health services. This type of outreach should be supported by the public and could potentially help as an evaluation program, as schools are understaffed and need support in their efforts. This support and outreach should include formal educational programs on mental health, public forums and presentations attached to professional organizations. There should be more opportunity for people who are affected by mental health to tell their stories so that others in the same situation can relate and are inspired to get help.

Once the stigma is overcome, individuals and families in Yuma County then are faced with knowing where to go and how to deal with access to professionals and services. This occurs both in the realm of direct services and obtaining and working through the insurance process. For families of those dealing with mental health needs, the lack of local services greatly impacts families compounding the issues their loved ones are facing with having to take time from work to travel to Phoenix or elsewhere. This increases the difficulty since there is a lack of a standard referral system and insufficient coordination of services for individuals who are in need of services. Additionally, there exists a disparity of services for individuals depending on their type of insurance coverage. The best solutions for bringing those services back to the local community is to begin to grow our own services, and retain professionals already located in our community. For the issues

of disparity, it would be helpful to have a public evaluation program that would allow individuals to determine what types of services they may need and qualify for.

Many constituents do not know where to go to address mental health needs. A designated, one stop site where people can go for information and resources on mental health and providers is needed. Individuals that need help may not know that they need help. Knowledge of how to obtain guardianship and resources for families to have voice in this situation is crucial. Some individuals do not have the resources nor insurance to help guide them to needed assistance. Providers in Yuma County are being inundated by the numbers of patients.

Family physicians are often the first place that patients go to for help; however, they may not be adequately prepared for diagnoses for mental health. There is concern that mental health issues may be misdiagnosed or discounted as “just a kid thing” for young people.

There are providers in Yuma County, but often not those who are specialized in younger ages, which limits what can be provided to that age group. There has been a recent increase in teenagers who need assistance, particularly for depression. If service cannot be provided in one location, patients are referred to other providers in other locations. There is a concern about the waiting time for patients to see providers.

The cost of services for mental health is very expensive. Some therapy may not be covered by medical insurance. The lack of pediatric mental health services is of great concern. While there are medications for various mental health issues, medications in this area were underdeveloped for many years. Many current medications for mental health issues are not generic and can be costly.

Waitlists to receive services can be very long, making the patient feel that they are forgotten. Including a bridge so that patients can obtain assistance while they are waiting and focusing on better working relationships with outside facilities would help patients transition to care.

There is a lack of specialized mental health care, particularly for young people and the elderly. The high school system has seen a definite increase in mental health issues with students. There have been issues with how to access funds to pay for services needed. The high school district has a social worker on site for each high school, and has partnered with other agencies to provide services to students without students and their families needing to be concerned about how these services are paid for. It is necessary to be proactive on how services are provided to young people.

For seniors there is concern on accurate diagnosis of the patient and for elders, the additional issue of dealing with technology based or supported services as many of them lack access or knowledge on how to use those technologies.

There are challenges for individuals with mental health issues who go through the court system. The paperwork to obtain access is difficult, especially for the homeless. There is a cycle of homeless individuals not receiving timely assistance, which may cause them

to walk away from help. To better understand what these individuals go through, it is recommended that residents attend a mental health court to see what happens during this process and learn more about this service to the community.

The psychiatry group has adapted to the ongoing crisis in mental health. These personnel are on call at the hospital to focus on meeting the needs of individuals who need help. Family doctors also help patients who require assistance. There are opportunities for family members to learn about the paperwork needed for patients and how to advocate for the patient. Workshops for general practice physicians would help those who first see patients with mental health issues.

This all leads to the largest barrier faced by those looking to address mental health in the Yuma Community, the lack of local services. While there is telehealth mental health services provided to students at the college, having local services would provide more coverage. This barrier encapsulates not only a lack of inpatient and outpatient services directly, but the lack of transport to such services and support for those who are trying to care for family members dealing with mental illness. The central solution to the lack of local services is to “grow our own”, that is to provide an educational program locally, that educates and creates the necessary mental health professionals and support staff that are needed to provide the level of service that is lacking in the Yuma Community.

Question 2

Think about our vision to develop expanded behavioral health in our region for generations to come. What specific needs / services would you like to see developed/prioritized in the next 5 years?

In the next five years, Yuma County would benefit from a local hotline that could provide services to individuals in need of assistance. Strengthening and expanding the crisis team and preparing them to work with youth would benefit our area and lessen the wait time. Coordination of care between the providers, families, and schools is crucial. It is important that the psychiatry group at the hospital grow to be able to meet the needs of the community, including more therapists and therapists who are prepared to help young people. A caseworker who helps patients navigate the system would help those who need assistance. Overall, people in the community need to know what steps are involved in providing assistance to individuals with mental health issues.

Over the next five years the Yuma Community would be best served in expanding systems that provide local services, evaluations for mental health needs and assisting the transition from inpatient to outpatient care. While the current psychiatry services provides needed assistance to our county, specifically, an expansion to the educational opportunities in mental health services locally, would allow for the growth of local services and in recruiting mental health providers and case managers. Yuma County would be

greatly impacted by the institution and expansion of a formal education program in mental healthcare as it would establish the providers so desperately needed. In this expansion we need to look not just to the quantity but also the quality of those services.

A future benefit to Yuma County would be creating a psychiatry residency program so that this service could be expanded locally. A beneficial goal would be to grow current systems in place while working toward the “grow our own” idea of ensuring there exists in the Yuma community the professionals, staff and facilities for inpatient and outpatient services. To get there we can begin with building direct services through in-person and virtual services, then move towards growing and retaining locally the professionals and staff for Inpatient and Intensive Outpatient. Once those systems are in place, we can grow the reach and quality of the services by bringing in non-profit and for-profit agencies, schools and the public. The continued availability and funding for services in the school setting during this growing process has already been shown to be invaluable for the well-being of adolescents in the community. In particular, Yuma County needs to consider transportation options for different age groups to be able to access care.

It is crucial to provide mental health services to all age groups. There are currently only two facilities within the state who accept teens. It is necessary to augment these facilities to help families with teenagers who need these services and including one in the Yuma County area would help. Sending their children away for an unspecified amount of time is very difficult for families. The geri-psych group represents a population that is challenging to find assistance for as guardianship can take months to process in certain cases and appropriate diagnosis can be difficult.

Doing a survey for patients requiring mental health assistance would benefit our community assessing the quality of service provided. This could be a critical next step to improve the quality of care in Yuma County. A centralized database would also help provide needed care to patients.

Above all, the vision for the future needs to be centered on the concept of a “safe place” where all individuals can have somewhere or someone individuals can go to in order to talk and feel safe.

Question 3

What are the opportunities to leverage and build partnerships that would enhance access to mental health services and support?

Leverage and partnerships need to be based on trust and individuals need to be able to give that feeling of trust in return.

A consortium for mental health services could benefit Yuma County so that all could benefit from across-the-board service. The Portland, Oregon, area has created a one stop mental health center through partnerships. The Yuma County Health Department

would be a strong resource to get people to the appropriate location for mental health. This department has started to receive grants to fund this initiative.

Partnering within education is important. The education system is one that has been partnering to provide services to our county. Northern Arizona University – Yuma and Arizona State University provide social work interns who provide services within area schools. Increasing awareness through partnering with local schools is an opportunity. Schools, the college, and universities, churches and non-profits could host events and increase social engagement on this topic as well as engage in partnerships for training. Sharing resources to help our community is crucial.

It is important to advocate for Yuma County to our elected officials. Access to funding and services for mental health is essential. Building relationships with the school districts would help our community augment needed relationships. Binational collaboration would assist in helping our border area population.

A key facet of leveraging those services currently available and the experts in Yuma County is to somehow spread the information in a comprehensive manner. With this type of information partnership, individuals and organizations can discover and leverage the availability of services, programs and funding to expand services so that best practice information to those looking to address mental health in our community is available. Some services currently present or arriving online include the 988 services for mental health emergencies which will include a texting option for adolescents and those who do not feel comfortable speaking on the phone; 741741 which is a national hotline; and First Things First, which has a Yuma Region Resource Connection Guide. Once these services have been identified looking towards expanding programs that are in existence, like the high school Yellow Ribbon program, could be expanding outreach to the Jr. High School level. A lack of resources is always a concern when considering expansion.

Question 4 (Orange group and Paul's group)

What will be my action to impact change?

I commit to continue supporting those on the front lines who do the hard work in ways that I can.

Sharing my story with helping those I love and myself to get services and evaluations. Working with nonprofits to build solutions.

I plan to continue to support the leadership of YRMC and their commitment to addressing the needs in Yuma.

We are committed to continue working with all available resources and learn from the experts. With the additional knowledge, the doors open a little more. We want to make this right and to meet our community needs.

Continue to educate and advocate on the stigma around mental health.

Talk about it! Let's get rid of the stigma.

Form a group to hold providers accountable.

Be the voice for the individuals who cannot speak up for themselves.

Partner with the courts and the justice system.

Connect the field of substance abuse more with the mental health agencies we have in town.

Investigate putting up mental health education tools in the waiting room of our clinic or in the rooms; help expand our resource list.

Educate our community about mental/social health; advocate for our youth to get more resources in Yuma County after they get referred.

Provide a safe place for a spiritual component.

Implement a substance abuse teaching curriculum in our residency program.

Help with the development of the psychiatric residency.

Reach out to community partners to create a community referral guide.

Get that information out to student's families.

Create internal staff mental health program, and whatever I can do.

Continue to work towards bringing voices forward of those who have faced mental health issues.

Southwest Arizona Town Hall

Substance Use in our Community

June 10, 2022

Question1

What are the underlying causes of substance use disorder and the increase use of fentanyl in our community? What are the barriers or lack of support for treatment and support for those experiencing substance use disorder in our community(ies)?

The underlying causes of substance use disorder in the Yuma community are mental health issues, environmental factors, familial factors, and societal factors. Often drugs are being used to change the way an individual feels emotionally. Substance users may not intend or know the repercussions of the road they are following. Additionally, particularly with minors, the lack of familial and peer support causes individuals to seek the use of substances to deal with emotions and thoughts they are struggling to cope with.

Yuma County's proximity to the US/Mexico border creates more accessibility to and availability of drugs. Some young adults participate in drug trafficking because it is an enticing opportunity to make more money than in a traditional job. For those selling fentanyl, it is inexpensive to buy and then mark up.

It has also taken a long time to get the word out about the severity of fentanyl. Fentanyl is very potent, even when compared to other drugs, which makes it very dangerous. This drug is highly addictive, inexpensive, and easy to get, which is a very dangerous combination.

Drugs have long been a form of self-medication for those dealing with mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, and fentanyl is no different. The Yuma County community is dealing with a lack of resources for mental health which deepens the problem. There are also many young children exposed to fentanyl, which means we need to begin drug education much earlier.

There are many barriers, lack of support for treatment, and missed opportunities to provide support for those experiencing substance use disorder in our community. To start, careers in treatment support and rehabilitation are not well-paid for the amount of work and stress involved. Caseloads are large, time intensive, and stressful to manage. Yuma County lacks the necessary mental health facilities and providers in our region and needs more funding and resources to make this happen.

Pathways to recovery need to be more accessible. Insurance coverage for mental health is difficult to navigate, such as understanding what is covered, what is not, or how to get access to financial support.

The Yuma community faces barriers such as the cost of treatments, access to treatments, delay of care and support to community members. These barriers often overlap through the stigma and shame that families and individuals facing substance use issues. This can be seen in requests of families seeking treatments on Sunday afternoons or other times they anticipate others not being in the facility. The judicial system can be a solution to the barrier, and local expanded treatment options making access to treatment easier and more affordable both for patients and families would help to dismantle many of the barriers to treatments.

Family issues can also be a barrier to treatment. Those who need substance abuse treatment don't always want to be helped. To support the treatment, family members need to be prepared to give a lot of time and attention to help the one in need.

Solutions to these barriers include the need to empower young people to feel better about their choices and their future. Drug prevention should not be approached from a place of fear and darkness. We need to show young people that they are in control of their future.

Parents need to be empowered to support their children through more education opportunities, offering more Spanish language resources, and by bringing all healthcare providers together - one stop where all elements of health can be addressed – physical and mental.

Question 2

Think about our vision to develop expanded substance use disorder treatment and awareness in our region for generations to come. What specific needs / services would you like to see developed/prioritized in the next 5 years?

In Yuma County the greatest need is the expansion of high-level treatment facilities in the County as patients and families struggle with having to travel to receive in-patient treatment and support those family members trying to support those individuals. Critically, the Yuma community needs a Level 1- Inpatient treatment facility. A key aspect in these expansions is to ensure that it includes availability across economic strata, specifically those not on ACCESS or other government support. Additionally, as these services are being expanded, the expansion needs to include services for families and caregivers.

Another service that would be helpful in preventing substance use are early and regular screenings for mental health concerns before such mental health issues lead to drug use. This would be accomplished through expansion to primary care providers.

We must fund and build the necessary infrastructure for rehabilitation and mental health to include: support for those with substance use disorder navigating the healthcare system; building of more facilities; and recruitment of properly trained mental health professionals. As part of this infrastructure, we must focus on growing our own mental health and rehabilitation professionals. We could encourage those who want to get clean and sober to follow careers that support and guide others who want to get clean and sober. Peer support is beneficial and powerful.

When thinking of our vision to develop expanded substance use disorder treatment and awareness in our region today and in the next five years, we must prioritize drug prevention education in our schools (all ages) and within our region. Educational resources need to be more readily available, in both English and Spanish.

Finally, a prioritization of the integration between current support systems to ensure individuals do not fall through the cracks or repeat treatment is critical to lowering the overall substance use in the Yuma community. This could be done by a holistic system instead of piecemeal for the services that organizations provide directly to individuals. This would ensure that any service provider would have the ability to tailor treatment to an individual's specific needs

Question 3

What are the opportunities to leverage and build partnerships that would enhance access to treatment, awareness, and intervention services and support?

There are many opportunities to enhance access to treatment, awareness, and intervention support and services by leveraging and building partnerships in Yuma County. We already do well working together and currently have many agencies working toward addressing drug prevention, mental health, and rehabilitation.

We must use this community collaboration to gain more funding, such as grants, non-traditional partnerships, and coalitions, to support the work being done and the work that is still needed. We can better utilize social media for community outreach and peer support.

The Yuma community can leverage its relationships with the University of Arizona and other higher education facilities, the hyper-local drug prevention and treatment organizations throughout the county to blanket the entire county in information and

partnerships between law enforcement and health care professionals to educate the community, particularly students, on the risks of substance use, and peer support groups.

The partnerships that the community has with higher education facilities can be leveraged to encourage the expansion of mental healthcare provider education, particularly mental health providers, that can catch the co-morbidities before these issues arise and lead to substance use. While the partnerships between the hyper-local drug deterrence and treatment programs that are already doing great work within the communities of Yuma County can provide coverage across the county, providing clearer information as to the process for seeking help and the dangers of overdoses. This would also include cross border programs for those families that are living on both sides of the border.

Additionally, the partnerships between law enforcement and health care professionals with schools can be leveraged to get information into schools about the costs, risks, and avoiding substance use to begin with. The creation and expansion of peer support groups creating grassroots support for individuals, again particularly students, to reach out and discuss their issues without the stigma associated with going to professional care initially.

Question 4

What will be my action to impact change?

Continue to lobby for Federal and State Funding and get more involved in community actions.

Continue to be available to my community on the front line continue to educate all people on these crises.

Continue to listen to the experts in the field, families and community that are impacted in order to develop strategies that are community driven.