

Advocates hope study spurs area to action

Mental health survey
found high, low points

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Local mental health advocates hope a new study will spur discussion about how to better help those in need of mental health care.

The study was commissioned by Southwestern Healthcare and funded by a Welborn Baptist Foundation grant. Southwestern provides mental health and addiction treatment services for Gibson, Posey, Vanderburgh and Warrick counties, including the Mulberry Center, a Steppingstone substance abuse treatment center.

The study was the first of its kind for Evansville.

"What I see happening in the next several months is getting the providers around the table and saying 'Is there anything we can address?'" said John Browning, Southwestern's president and chief executive.

The study surveyed area mental health care and addiction service providers, examined various sources of data and included focus groups.

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It found that barriers still exist to accessing mental health and addiction services. The biggest obstacles were being underinsured and the inability to pay for services.

The focus groups, Browning said, showed inability to pay was a key issue for those with and without insurance.

Browning said insurance plans often cover only initial assessments or a limited number of visits. And many assume that because they can't pay, mental

health and addiction services aren't available, he said.

"Southwestern provides services based on a patient's ability to pay. Well over 90 percent of our patients get some sort of subsidy against their full fee," Browning said.

Another problem identified in the study is that many families have incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid but too low to afford anything other than basic necessities.

About 76 percent of the providers who responded to the survey provide some form of assistance to help people pay for services.

The study also found

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a need for more psychiatrists; more long-term residential services and transitional living for individuals recovering from substance abuse; and more inpatient services for substance abuse treatment, especially for youth.

"Besides outpatient and incarceration, there are not many treatment options," Browning said. "People have to look outside of our area."

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Lack of funding for some services might explain some gaps found by the study, Browning said.

"As I looked at some of these gaps in service, I have seen some of these gaps occur in my career. Why did it disappear? The funding sources disappeared for it. Some of the things paid for years ago aren't paid for now," said Browning, who has worked in the field more than 30 years.

But the study also found strengths in how the Tri-

State provides treatment for mental health and addiction. They include the variety of organizations that provide treatment for individual issues; wide availability of organizations and support groups; the wide range of qualifications of the professionals providing treatments; and a strong sense of collaboration among the different service providers.

That may be the key to turning the assessment's results into action.

"This is a community needs assessment. It is now time for the community to look at this and say what can we do?" Browning said.