

## Brevard government and Brevard Family Partnership team up to expand system of care for youth — substance-abuse and mental-health services

By Ken Datzman

The Brevard County Housing and Human Services Department is teaming with Brevard Family Partnership Inc. to increase access to services and improve mental-health outcomes for children and adolescents, as well as provide support to their families.

They've partnered to create the "Brevard Behavioral Expansion" project. The four-year program is being funded with a \$4 million federal government grant and a \$2 million local match from Brevard Family Partnership and its community partners.

The \$6 million investment is coming at an opportune time as agencies are responding to the social and emotional challenges brought on by the mitigation efforts and policies put in place to address the coronavirus virus pandemic.

Expanding community-based hubs for behavioral health care is a key to improving the overall health of communities.

"This is a huge infusion of dollars at a critical time," said Phil Scarpelli, CEO of Brevard Family Partnership. "We are really going to take the forefront in Brevard County in major ways helping individuals and families. We are excited about this project."

Addressing the complex needs of people with mental- and substance-abuse disorders and being able to increase the capacity to serve them in a community setting is seen as the best way to respond to a targeted population.

The federal agency that awarded the grant is the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA.

The Brevard Behavioral Expansion project is designed to provide direct services to children and youth ages 5 to 21 with severe emotional disturbances or severe mental illness. Services will begin by November.

"SAMHSA wants us to help reduce the stigma associated with mental-health issues, to expand support for families and to determine what services families really need," said Tracy Pellegrino, senior executive for strategic partnerships and initiatives at the National Center for Innovation and Excellence, which is part of Brevard Family Partnership's family of agencies.

"There will be a lot of data collection, a lot of community conversations that will go into this initiative. We definitely need to bring youth and parents and caregivers to the table to talk about what works and what doesn't work. They will be part of the decision-making process."

Pellegrino said reducing the mental-



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Local government and Brevard Family Partnership are working together in the Brevard Behavioral Health Expansion project. The project provides services to children and youth ages 5 to 21 with severe emotional disturbances, as well as providing support to families. The four-year program is funded with a \$4 million federal grant and a \$2 million local match from BFP and its community partners. From left: Tracy Pellegrino, senior executive, strategic partnerships and initiatives, National Center for Innovation and Excellence; Phil Scarpelli, CEO, Brevard Family Partnership; and Ian Golden, director, Brevard County Housing and Human Services.

health stigma and "increasing strength-based positive interaction with people has a ripple effect and will make for a stronger community as we work together."

Each year, millions of Americans face the reality of living with a mental-health condition. However, mental illness affects everyone directly or indirectly through family, friends or coworkers, according to the National Alliance on Mental Health Illness.

Despite mental illnesses' reach and prevalence, stigma and misunderstanding are also, unfortunately, widespread.

Pellegrino said increasing telehealth options, "which we are doing more of nowadays," is one way of reaching people and providing care to our community.

Through the years, Pellegrino has written a number of grants that have

benefited Brevard County. "This is actually the fifth grant I've written that has received funding for the community."

She added, "This SAMHSA grant is going to be a big shot in the arm financially. It will give us the ability to triple the number of care coordinators that currently work with children who have mental-health issues. We are bringing on additional professionals to provide those services."

Ian Golden, Brevard County's Housing and Human Services' director, is the administrator and principal investigator for the project.

"We are always looking for ways to partner with our community in an effort to make a lasting, positive impact on

populations that are typically underserved," said Golden.

"We do a lot of work with low-income families. So this is a fantastic opportunity for us to step up as a county, in partnership with not only Brevard C.A.R.E.S. and Brevard Family Partnership, but also all of their partners throughout the community. This is an opportunity to bring some in-demand services to the community."

C.A.R.E.S. is an acronym for Collaboration, Advocacy, Resources, Education, and Support. Brevard C.A.R.E.S. is Brevard Family Partnership's innovative, voluntary child-abuse prevention program tailored to "protect children, strengthen families, and changes lives."

In December 2009, Brevard C.A.R.E.S.

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**Brevard Family Partnership**

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became a wholly owned subsidiary of Brevard Family Partnership with a mission, through abuse prevention, to continue to reduce the number of children entering the foster-care system.

Brevard C.A.R.E.S. offers a full array of support services and wraparound Family Team Conferencing to families experiencing stressors that often lead to abuse, abandonment, and neglect. The success of this nationally recognized program is because of the proactive participation of the families in need, said Pellegrino.

Golden said the SAMHSA grant had to be submitted through a governmental agency. “We were able to go to our County Commission and the County Commissioners were very supportive. They provided the approval to pursue the grant and submit the grant.”

Golden will establish Brevard County’s “Together in Partnership” community advisory board as the governance body.

One of the goals of the project will be to increase collaboration among child welfare, judicial, educational, health, behavioral health, and substance-abuse systems, and community providers and partners to enhance the overall system of care and build a sustainable infrastructure.

The project will provide care coordination to roughly 400 young people over the

four-year grant period.

“We know that abuse, neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental illness is generational,” said Scarpelli. “So 400 children are a starting point. In four years, I would love to see thousands of families having benefitted from this project.”

Pellegrino added that “part of what we want to expand is the non-traditional medical services like counseling. Sometimes families and young people just need some support to feel normal.”

Through the Behavioral Health Expansion project, Brevard Family Partnership will expand the “Youth Thrive” initiative which supports healthy development and promotes well-being for vulnerable youth, while exploring and ramping up additional evidence-based, evidence-emerging practices to support and engage children and youth on their path to becoming healthy adults.

Priority populations include those individuals recognized by child welfare with behavioral health challenges and who identify as LGBTQ, homeless, having a history of suicidal ideation, or having been a patient under the Baker Act (involuntary institutionalization).

The Baker Act is a Florida law that enables families and loved ones to provide emergency mental-health services and

temporary detention for people who are impaired because of their mental illness, and who are unable to determine their need for treatment.

“We are going to be aggressive and innovative in providing services to the LGBTQ community,” said Scarpelli. “We are proud to do this. I think we are going to be working more upstream than we ever did in the state, and I am excited about this opportunity.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s “Youth Risk Behavioral Survey,” 60 percent of LGBTQ youth reported being “so sad or hopeless” they stopped doing some of their usual activities.”

“Statistics on suicide show that youth rates are higher among the LGBTQ population,” said Scarpelli. LGBTQ young people are more than twice as likely to feel suicidal and over four times as likely to attempt suicide, compared to heterosexual youth, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey.

Substance abuse and mental-health issues have significant impacts on families, communities and societies. And these problems are on the rise among adolescents and young adults in America, according to the 2019 “National Survey on Drug Use and Health.” The annual nationwide mental-health survey is

conducted by a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Increases in mental-health problems are concentrated among adolescents and young adults, the study says.

Separately, amid the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released data on Americans and their mental health, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.

A staggering 75 percent of respondents in the 18-to-24 demographic reported at least one adverse mental-health symptom, and in that same age group, 25 percent considered suicide in the past 30 days.

“I have worked in this field for a long time,” said Scarpelli. “Mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and other issues have plagued society forever. Now, we also have the pandemic to deal with. When you take all those variables that impact families and incubate them with the virus, the risk goes through the roof.”

He continued, “So the timing of this grant couldn’t have been better, in a strange way. It really is a life jacket for those who could be potentially drowning and need treatment. We are happy to be working with the county to better this community, not only during the pandemic but also after the pandemic.”



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