

A collaborative approach to behavioral health care reform

by Jill Wiedemann-West

One of the most foundational problems (and opportunities) our behavioral health care system faces is the cohort nature of programs and services that tend to address various symptoms and problems one at a time, rather than through an integrated, whole-person or whole-community model of care.

On the surface, our programs, agencies and funding channels make sense. It makes sense that law enforcement's primary role should be keeping the community safe and that physicians should be chiefly concerned with their patients' physical well-being. We see how this model works in various industries when companies can focus narrowly on what they're good at, what they're staffed or funded for, and deprioritize the rest. However, when it comes to caring for individuals and communities, it's not always that simple. As we all know, humans are complex, and many things factor into our overall well-being. For example, a police officer may put an individual in jail for breaking the law without consideration for the underlying mental health issues that continue to go untreated, which will continue to cause adverse effects once that individual is back in the community. Or a physician may prescribe medication for a specific physical ailment, without understanding the history of mental health, addiction or related issues.

Because mental illness risk factors, diagnoses and symptoms are so integrated, we have to take an integrated approach to meet people's needs if we want to truly provide the best care and be most efficient and effective with our programs and funding. If we continue to look at symptoms one at a time, each from only our own perspective, we'll be left scratching our heads as to why our particular solution to the problem at hand didn't work, or why it resulted in new but correlated issues.

In my current role as CEO of People Incorporated — the largest community-based provider of mental health services in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area — I, along with my team, have been championing a whole-person care model for a number of years, and we've experienced both efficiencies as an organization and improvements in outcomes for our clients when we look at the whole picture in addressing individual symptoms or needs. Housing, nutrition, social structures, treatments for physical illnesses and more — we look at the fusion of all the avenues that lead back to mental health, doing our best to address them

simultaneously.

More organizations are catching on. In the fall of 2016, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services developed a new nationwide pilot program, recruiting participants that would be certified as a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC). A CCBHC is designed to bring together behavioral, chemical and physical health care, rather than the traditional model of needing to contact several agencies for different services, and link payment models with patient outcomes. Because People Incorporated's structure has already been moving in this direction, it is ideally suited for this program. To date, People Incorporated has served 6,858 discrete consumers through a CCBHC, and of those, 624 received more than one CCBHC service. Outcomes of this pilot program are already proving to be favorable. In a survey of 600 clients, 76 percent agreed that their condition had improved in the first 10 months of the program.

No one organization or agency can do it all, and that's why strategic partnerships are so paramount. We're seeing great success in building alliances with local law enforcement and hospital systems — embedding our own personnel into their systems as a resource and link between physical health care, community safety and mental health. Through partnerships in the Twin Cities and beyond, we've expanded our Training Institute to offer mental health courses that are catered to professionals and community members in various roles — from parents to educators, business leaders, health care professionals and more — so that as a community, we're more equipped in various environments to provide care.

Solving this problem isn't linear, and breaking down siloes we've had in place for generations won't come without growing pains. But if we do it right, and pay attention to the research and models that are working well, we steward our fixed and shrinking budgets and resources better, and find more sustainable paths to well-being for individuals and communities.

Jill Wiedemann-West is CEO of People Incorporated, the largest community-based provider of mental health services in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.