



Mental Health & Substance Use 2022

Foundational Forum

 **SWATH**
South West Arizona Town Hall

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Mental Health in our Community
May 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.

Substance Use in our Community

June 2022

Question 1

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.