

UPSTATE FOUNDATION WINS FUNDING TO TRAIN DOCTORS TO DIAGNOSE, TREAT MENTAL-HEALTH ISSUES

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Upstate Medical University will use a \$100,000 grant from the Buffalo-based Patrick P. Lee Foundation to train primary-care physicians in the diagnosis and treatment of mental-health issues. (Photo by zoeyadvertising.com)
SYRACUSE, N.Y. — Upstate Medical University will use a \$100,000 grant to train primary-care physicians in the diagnosis and treatment of mental-health issues.

The Patrick P. Lee Foundation — a private, Buffalo-based foundation focused on mental health and education — awarded the grant funding to the Upstate Foundation, per a news release.

The Lee Foundation provided similar grants to improve access to mental-health services to Horizon Health Services and Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT).

“We selected innovative programs at Horizon Health, RIT and Upstate Foundation that expand and redefine the traditional mental health workforce to include other trusted partners, such as primary care,” Jane Mogavero, executive director of the Lee Foundation, said. “Our goal is not to replace clinical services, but to create more opportunities.”

Upstate Medical University will use workshops and the Project ECHO platform to increase the capacity of primary- and family-medicine providers in the eight counties of Central New York to “systematically screen, identify, treat, and appropriately refer” patients suffering from mental-health disorders.

In Project ECHO, which uses video technology, Upstate experts function as the hub to deliver education, knowledge, and best practices to the primary-care clinicians in the region.

The goal is for primary providers to enhance their competencies in the treatment of mild to moderate mental-health disorders and provide “much needed mental health care in a timely and appropriate manner.”

Upstate will also provide information about appropriate referrals, particularly with complex situations; encourage comfort in a consultation model; and enable the development of a “collaborative care pathway” between the providers and psychiatrists.

Drs. Nevena Radonjic and Seetha Ramanathan — who work in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences — are leading the project and applaud this opportunity to support greater access to mental-health expertise for patients.

“Most primary care physicians are already addressing a large number of mental health issues in their patients,” Radonjic said. “This effort, supported by the Lee Foundation, will help strengthen their capabilities. We anticipate that at the end of every cycle of training, primary care physicians will be able to notice an increase in their competencies to address a range of mental health needs and make appropriate referrals when needed.”

“This effort will not only improve competencies but can also act as the first step towards establishing a more streamlined system of care between the primary care and mental health systems,” Ramanathan said.

An estimated 122 million Americans — including 4 million in New York — live in a “mental-health shortage area,” as designated by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration.

Although the workforce shortage was a problem prior to the pandemic, the recent increase in demand for mental-health services has made the situation “even more critical.”

In 2020, four in 10 U.S. adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, representing a “significant increase” from the previous year when one in 10 adults reported the same symptoms, Upstate Medical said.