

Telehealth helps, but access remains key mental health issue during pandemic

Even as telehealth helped address some behavioral and mental health needs during Covid-19, Assembly members raised questions during a Tuesday hearing on how mental health services could be maintained amid budget constraints.

Dr. Ann Marie Sullivan, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Health, said telehealth claims from mental health clinics grew to 90% of all claims in April from 35% in March, which was meaningful in a climate where depression, anxiety, trauma and suicidal symptoms had all increased during the pandemic.

Legislators noted that mental health access remains inadequate especially in situations where police respond to calls where a mentally ill individual is involved, such as the incident in Rochester where a mentally ill Black man was killed in March by the police's use of a restraint.

The office is trying to launch a system in which people can call for mental health services rather than just call 911 in such circumstances, and that more crisis intervention training for the police will be provided, Sullivan said.

With a potential 20% budget cut on the horizon, some lawmakers were skeptical how resources could be provided to produce those appropriate responders. "Locals want but can't afford full-time crisis responders," said Assemblyman Thomas Abinanti.

Police training on deescalating interactions with the mentally ill has been spotty, and instituting forcewide training must be mandated at a state level, which requires money, he added.

Legislators also were worried that existing programs serving people of color were in jeopardy because of budget constraints, to which the commissioner responded that the office would prioritize helping communities that need help the most.

The state has requested \$130 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to launch a statewide counseling service to help address psychological needs. Should the assistance come, it would help with the expected budget tightness, Sullivan said.

In-patient visitation at mental health facilities resumed upstate last week, and downstate facilities are expected to follow soon, Sullivan said. In the meantime downstate facilities are using virtual visits in which families are given iPads to facilitate contact, she added.

It's unclear, however, how soon routine home visits to check on mental health will resume. "That depends on the severity of Covid-19 in the county," Sullivan said.

Employment training for people with developmental disabilities is expected to ramp up in the coming months, after having been reduced during Covid-19.

Sullivan acknowledged finding employment might be a challenge because of economic conditions. "But employment training is expected to continue," she said.