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Brian Durham: Community colleges and mental health

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Illinois' community college system is the third largest in the nation, working with more than 600,000 students each year. The mission at each of our 48 community colleges is to provide high-quality, accessible, cost-effective educational opportunities for individuals and communities across our state. That's a long way of saying, it's our job is to provide support and resources to students that help them sharpen their minds, hone their skills, and better their quality of life.

For our system to meet its mission, now more than ever before, it must prioritize student mental health. Doing so is key to positioning our students for success in and outside of the classroom. That includes continued investment in mental health resources for our students and the communities we serve and strengthening those resources on campus, making them more accessible and available.

The ongoing global health pandemic has added significant stress to many lives, and it is our responsibility as a community resource to find ways for our students and staff to have easy access to information and support services when needed.

We are gathering a lot of important information through our community colleges about the demand for mental health services, and why more students are seeking help. For example, in one survey, Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield reports that more than half of its students seeking mental health services have never received any type of counseling previously.

I'm happy to report that the Illinois Community College Board is now a part of the Mental Health Access on College Campuses Learning Collaborative, bringing together community college and university administrators to share ideas and solutions in 2022. These include integrating mental health awareness into existing campus culture, examining best practices for Peer-to-Peer Programs, addressing mental health stigmas in a culturally competent way, preparing a mental health response for a campus-wide tragedy, and leveraging community resources and partnerships to increase mental health services capacity.

Community colleges are doing their part as well. Heartland Community College in Normal is using a grant from the Illinois Department of Human Services to expand the Certified Recovery Support Specialist (CRSS) program which prepares students for entry-level positions as behavioral health workers, specifically to help those with substance abuse and mental health disorders. The investment will help Heartland add more support resources to students that want to enter the behavioral health sector with funded practicum experience along with financial assistance for books, fees and other certification costs.

The Illinois Community College System is also providing social and emotional support thanks to the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Funding including; developing partnerships with community organizations that connect students to comprehensive student support, enhancing the accessibility of behavioral counseling resources for students most disadvantaged by COVID-19 circumstances, and investing in infrastructure for mental health and wellness that address gaps in mental health services on campus.

While those efforts look at the longer view of support, Illinois community colleges are also providing help now by investing in cost effective ways to provide mental health services and resources including tele-mental health services. These contracted support resources are available around the clock and allow students to select a counselor that resonates with them because there are more providers to choose from.

Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, for example, is utilizing federal funding to increase access to mental health services on its campus by providing access to an online mental health screening tool available 24/7. The platform screens for a growing list of behavioral health concerns including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, then directs the person to additional mental health resources.

I'm encouraged that Illinois is making mental health an even higher priority on our campuses in 2022 and helping take the lead in developing a stronger mental health system here at home.

Brian Durham is the executive director of the Illinois Community College Board

