



Sussex County Mental Health Services Face Covid-19 Challenges

By DANIEL DEVINE

October 2, 2020 at 11:42 PM



SUSSEX COUNTY, NJ - The Covid-19 pandemic is creating concerns about increased demand for mental health services in Sussex County, while the funding sources needed to support those services are under pressure.

That was a major theme discussed by the members of the county's Mental Health Board (MHB) at its monthly meeting. Representatives from local mental health organizations and county employees present at the September 17 virtual meeting echoed that observation.

"Sussex County is concerned about the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the mental health needs of our residents," said Cindy Armstrong during a follow-up interview conducted by email. Armstrong is the county's Mental Health Administrator and the meeting's organizer.

Sign Up for Sparta Newsletter

Our newsletter delivers the local news that you can trust.

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

An [August report](#) in The New England Journal of Medicine signals a similar concern, reporting that financial losses, infringements on personal freedom, and conflicting messages from authorities "undoubtedly will contribute to widespread emotional distress and increased risk for psychiatric illness associated with Covid-19." The authors' observations are based on studies of past pandemics.

MHB meeting participants also reported that funding for mental health services was under pressure because the revenues of the government and private mental health care organizations have been negatively impacted by the damaged economy, an effect of Covid-19 [reported](#) broadly.

Transportation was one topic of particular concern for the meeting participants, since it impacts a variety of services. Keeping services available becomes irrelevant for those who can't get to the service provider.

Christine Florio, Sussex County Director of Community and Youth Services and Transit, reported that there are concerns that the funding for transportation services will be impacted by Covid-19. According to [New Jersey law](#), a portion of its revenues from casinos is allocated to the 21 county transportation services. Florio said that there are concerns that the funding may be reduced due to [the original March closure of casinos in New Jersey, and subsequent limited opening in July](#).

The funding that is provided through the Senior Citizen and Disabled Resident Transportation Assistance Act (SCDRTAP) is "essential to maintaining quality coordinated transportation services," said Florio, "including vital rides for senior citizens and individuals with disabilities to such appointments as medical treatments, therapies, and for basic needs such as food and medicines, employment and training, school and college, nutrition sites, senior centers, and recreation, among others."

The long-term impact of this reduced funding is yet to be determined according to Florio.

The National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI), a leading mental health organization, [estimates](#) that Covid-19 could decrease revenues and other funding sources of mental health organizations in the United States by up to 50%.

Armstrong did emphasize that despite Covid-19 challenges, many mental health services are still available to Sussex County residents, a directory of which can be found [on the County website](#). These include, among many other service categories, alcohol and substance abuse, crisis intervention, food pantries, mental health, transport, and child services.

The MHB has also made available a [webpage with links to short videos that describe different mental health services that are available to county residents](#), including emergency situations, outpatient substance abuse rehabilitation, family support, housing, and suicide prevention and wellness.

Sussex County and the MHB also has a public service campaign, called "Change Direction," aimed at increasing local awareness of the signs of mental illness, something of growing importance during Covid-19. Details of the new program can be found on a dedicated MHB [webpage](#).



Emojis used to teach key signs of possible mental illness, with more details available at [changedirection.org](#). Permission granted by MHB.

The elements of the Change Direction also include healthy habits that can be deployed to target signs of mental pain.

Sussex County Change Direction Initiative	
5 Signs someone may be in in mental pain	Healthy habits of emotional well-being
Personality change: slow and gradual or rapid changes, differences	Take Care: sleep, eat, exercise
Agitated: angry, moody, temper, anxious, poor sleep	Check in: doctor, counselor, family, friends, religious leader
Withdrawn: socially disengaged, start to miss work or school	Engage: maintain healthy relationships, can't do it alone
Poor Self-Care: stop taking care of themselves, increasing risky behavior	Relax: mediate, be active, garden, cook, do the things you love
Hopelessness: overcome with hopelessness, overwhelmed with circumstances	Know: know the signs, and reach out to others or help yourself

The next MHB meeting is scheduled for October 15, 3:30 p.m.

Sussex County Mental Health Board Seeks New Members

The Sussex County Mental Health Board is seeking new members. The board's mission is to provide adequate care for adults and children with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. Anyone interested in joining the MHB can contact Cindy Armstrong at carmstrong@sussex.nj.us.