

# MENTAL HEALTH WEEKLY

Essential information for decision-makers

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Engagement with academic and community leaders, informing students about behavioral health careers, and internship training are among the recruitment and retention strategies shared by behavioral health professionals last week. The webinar to address workforce challenges was hosted by the National Association for Children's Behavioral Health in collaboration with the Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network. . . . See top story, this page

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## Training, funding support, collaboration key to recruit, retain BH providers

Enrollment in graduate programs fluctuated wildly during the pandemic, with both the University of Maryland and Howard University, for example, reporting declines in enrollment in 2020 and 2021 as well as reductions in the numbers of graduates, attendees heard during a webinar hosted by the National Association for Children's Behavioral Health (NACBH) in collaboration with the Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network (MHTTC) earlier this month.

### Bottom Line...

*Professionals from the behavioral health field share their successful strategies for navigating these workforce issues and challenges.*

Those declines are showing some rebounding, said Raymond Crowley, Psy.D., senior associate for school-based equity at MHTTC, during the webinar session, "Addressing the Challenges of Recruiting and Retaining Behavioral Health Providers." "I suspect the drops are replicated in other parts of the country," said Crowley.

Crowley and other behavioral health professionals shared successful strategies for navigating workforce challenges and issues.

Two challenges that people face in graduate schools are the rising costs of graduate education along with unprecedented student loan debt, he said. Social workers, for example, experience varying costs

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## Groups partner on support tool for mental health needs of cancer patients

Despite compelling evidence that mental health support for patients with cancer improves their follow-up care and quality of life, many patients struggle to gain access to needed mental health services. An organization that offers free resources to cancer patients and their caregivers has entered into a partnership that will offer personalized digital support to patients in need.

Cancer Support Community, a nonprofit organization that offers

resources at nearly 200 locations supported by oncologic social workers and licensed mental health professionals, is partnering with developers of the Mika Health app-based platform to offer Mika's digital therapeutic in the U.S. The artificial intelligence-enabled support tool has been available in several European countries and now has been authorized for use in the U.S. under the Food and Drug Administration's Section 513(g) regulatory process for medical devices.

Cancer Support Community CEO Sally Werner told *MHW* that digital support tools have become especially important for patients and families since the COVID-19 pandemic. She

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### Bottom Line...

*Research has suggested that digital support tools can benefit patients with cancer who often struggle to access mental health-related services.*

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713 (71.2%) were located in a metropolitan county, 151 (15.1%) were publicly operated and 935 (93.4%) accepted Medicaid as payment.

The percentage offering telehealth declined from 799 (81.6%) to 765 (79%). Among MHTFs offering telehealth, a smaller percentage in wave 2 offered audio-only telehealth (369 [49.3%] vs. 244 [34.1%], as well as telehealth for comorbid alcohol use disorder (559 [76.3%] vs. 457 [66.5%]

hand, when we asked these facilities about specific services, for example, telehealth for psychotherapy and telehealth for medication management, many fewer facilities said ‘yes’ to offering these.”

McBain added that for example, almost 80% of facilities said “yes” to offering telehealth for psychotherapy in early 2023, before the end of the PHE. Just six months later, this figure declined to 60%, a 20-percent-age point drop, he added.

He added, “But the data we report show access to these services is trending swiftly downward for particular offerings like therapy, medication management, and diagnostic services. How robust are these trends? That should be answered with claims data in the coming months.”

When asked whether MHTFs that accepted Medicaid have a tendency to continue providing telehealth services, McBain said, “In a way, yes. We found that facilities that accept Medicaid were more likely to offer telehealth across both waves of surveys we administered compared to facilities that didn’t accept Medicaid.”

The most straightforward policy to ensure telehealth remains a benefit for people with mental health conditions would be for states to pass legislation requiring insurers — including private insurers and state Medicaid agencies — to continue paying for telehealth services, including at parity with reimbursements for in-person services, McBain explained.

“If insurers refuse to pay, or if they decide to pay much less than for in-person services, facilities will be much more hesitant to offer telehealth as an option,” he stated. “At the federal level, Congress could also approve sustained Medicare reimbursement for telehealth, which is set to expire.” •

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Ryan McBain, Ph.D, MPH

compared with wave 1. In wave 2, MHTFs were more likely to report telehealth was only available under certain conditions for therapy (141 facilities [18%] vs. 276 [36.4%] and medication management (216 facilities [28%] vs. 304 [41.3%].

The two major findings need to be viewed together, said McBain. “On the one hand, most facilities (about 80%) continue to state they offer telehealth, he said. “So almost nothing changed here. On the other

According to the study, MHTFs that stopped offering telehealth were more likely to be public facilities.

### Clinical implications

“Time will tell, but the clinical implications could be very large over the longer-run,” said McBain. We know that millions of Americans have been getting access to mental health services through telehealth, and people like telehealth as an easier way to get care.”

### CANCER from page 1

referred to the Mika Health therapeutic as a “standout product” that will help her organization meet patients and caregivers where they are along the journey to wellness. “Health apps are a great engagement tool,” Werner said.

### A demonstrated need

Cancer Support Community has a research arm that has documented the need for more effective mental health support for patients and caregivers. Its survey of 600 U.S. cancer

patients found that 60% never received a physician referral for a mental health screening. In addition, 40% of patients who directly asked for mental health support didn’t receive it, due in part to access barriers such as financial constraints, long wait times for appointments, or the inability to schedule an appointment at all.

Leaders of both Cancer Support Community and Mika Health consider their services as ways to fill gaps in access to support. “There is a lot of evidence for the things you

can do as a cancer patient,” Mika Health founder and managing director Gandolf Finke, Ph.D., told *MHW*. “We see ourselves as a building block,” and not a replacement for other existing services.

The digital therapeutic offers its users tools for lessening the impact of cancer-related distress. It can help organize patients’ ongoing therapeutic interventions, and it offers education and advice in critical quality-of-life areas such as exercise, nutrition and financial planning.

Tools such as these can help to

combat the feelings of isolation that often stem from patients' worries about what lies ahead for them, Werner said.

Mika Health's experience with the app in Europe has found that the typical user will access the service two to three times a week on average, Finke said. Individuals will typically maintain access to the platform over the course of more than a 200-day period, he said.

Also, contrary to what some might expect, users of the technology have typically been an older patient group, Finke said, with older patients also tending to be more consistent in their use of the app.

Mika Health has served around 100,000 patients in Europe and has conducted clinical trials to demonstrate its impact on reducing distress in patients and families, Finke said.

### Evaluating the effects

Finke and Werner cited numerous variables that the two organizations will look for in monitoring the impact of the Mika Health therapeutic in the U.S. Finke said it will be important to evaluate patient improvement in both mental health and physical health symptoms.

"We see mental health as a really underserved aspect of cancer care, but that doesn't mean everything else is going well," Finke said. The realms of mental health and physical health are inevitably intertwined, he said.

It will also be important for the partner organizations to make progress in the area of health equity, reaching disadvantaged communities. Mika Health and Cancer Support Community plan to co-develop multilingual and multicultural components in order to enhance equity and inclusion, targeting both patients and caregivers with these culturally relevant offerings.

Werner said the organizations will examine whether the availability of the app helps to remove barriers to care, as well as whether its use will encourage more individuals to prioritize quality-of-life improvements in nutrition and exercise. Use of the app also could result in benefits in patients' compliance with their overall cancer care plan, she said.

The organizations expect to collaborate on research into patient behaviors affecting the trajectory of distress, anxiety, depression and overall quality of life.

Patients with advanced-stage prostate cancer will be an initial target group for the partnership, Werner said.

"Our prior experience piloting app-based mental health interventions showed reductions in anxiety and depression, so we are excited to partner with Mika in bringing their AI-enabled, evidence-based digital therapeutic to people coping with the challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis," Werner said in a news release announcing the partnership. "We are thrilled to work alongside an innovative leader in digital therapeutics whose commitment to improving cancer patients' access to care aligns so strongly with ours."

This initiative was formally announced in May at the annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology.

Cancer Support Community's free services for patients and caregivers are available through a variety of in-person and virtual options, including nearly 200 Cancer Support Community, Gilda's Club and health care partner locations across the country. Cancer Support Community has been in operation for more than 40 years. •

## APA poll: Most adults say sports participation benefits their MH

A new poll released by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) that examined the benefits of exercise and sports, reveals that the majority of respondents (57%) indicate that they participate in sports and that nearly all of them (84%) said that it benefits their mental health.

APA's Healthy Minds Monthly polls, conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of APA, was fielded June 18–19, 2024, among 2,203 adults.

According to the poll, adults (73%) said team sports are beneficial to youth mental health — most commonly citing exercise (41%), being part of a team (41%), and increased confidence (31%) as benefits. Very

few (6%) said team sports are detrimental to youths' mental health.

Additionally the overwhelming majority (85%) of adults said that mental health should be prioritized just as much as physical health in professional athletes.

APA also noted that the upcoming summer Olympics kicks off in Paris later this month. "You don't have to be an Olympic athlete to reap the mental health benefits of exercise and sports," APA President Ramaswamy Viswanathan, M.D., Dr.Med.Sc., stated in a news release. "Getting together with a group of friends, working out, having a hobby, all these aspects of sports can be good for positive mental health."

"In recent years we've heard Olympic and professional athletes share stories about their own mental health challenges," added APA CEO and Medical Director Marketa M. Wills, M.D., M.B.A. "Their courage and openness help others understand that it's okay to take a break or ask for help when needed."

The majority (57%) of adults regularly participate in sports — most commonly swimming (19%), basketball (18%) and running (17%). Men, younger adults, and non-white adults are especially likely to participate in sports.

The few adults who said team sports are detrimental to children

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