

Mental health care shortage aggravated by surging demand

By John Miller

A historic shortage of mental health care providers in the United States has become an even greater concern over the past year as a growing number of people have sought treatment for behavioral health conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Diversus Health, which describes itself as the only community behavioral health care provider in El Paso County, saw 14,121 clients from July 2020 through March 24 alone, according to Elario Rickey, vice president of marketing and communications. Most sessions with clinicians have been taking place remotely since the pandemic began, with patients logging into web conferencing software for treatment. But even as telehealth has kept services available in many cases, Diversus (formerly AspenPointe) has been forced to refer an unusually high number of patients to other providers in the region as its workforce has remained at capacity.

“They have been pretty comfortable and confident with the virtual kind of space, and we’ve been able to utilize our access center staff and operations staff pretty well to educate patients and support them as they’re learning how to access in this new model of care,” said Jessica Kell, chief clinical officer at Diversus. “So that’s gone pretty well, but it’s just not having enough bodies to go around, you know? That’s been really notable. Our industry is not well prepared for a huge influx in demand for services.”

For many years, the United States has experienced a scarcity of health care providers for primary, dental and mental health care, although the latter has suffered from the lowest provider-to-patient ratio in most parts of the country.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, more than 115 million Americans live in areas in which the ratio of mental health professionals to residents is less than one

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