Reducing the Stigma of Mental Illness and Substance Abuse

By John DiAngelo, Inspira Health Network President and CEO

About 50 million people – more than a fifth of American adults - live with mental or substance abuse disorders in a given year, according to the Carter Center, founded by Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter. Patients with these conditions account for nearly half of the growth in hospital emergency department cases in New Jersey hospitals, and are far outpacing the overall growth in emergency department use, according to the New Jersey Hospital Association.

Mental illness can be perceived as a personal weakness or shortcoming. The stigma from this false perception undermines the individual’s family support system and degrades treatment adherence. The Carter Center estimates that as many as half of people suffering from serious behavioral or substance problems don’t seek treatment. Many others start treatment and don’t continue. It doesn’t have to be this way. Effective treatment is available. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that the success rate of treatment for schizophrenia (60 percent), depression (70-80 percent), and panic disorder (70-90 percent) surpasses that of many medical conditions, including heart disease.

Our mission at Inspira Health Network is to improve the lives of all we serve. This requires us to counter this surge in behavioral health disorders and address the issue of stigmatization. This effort starts in a small but emblematic way with our Healthcare Concierge service, 1-800-INSPIRA. By selecting the behavioral health prompt any consumer, friend or family member, can discuss their needs or issues with a behavioral wellness access counselor. The access counselor works through any stigma issues and discusses treatment options based on the needs of the consumer. In addition, the access counselor insures that when individuals with mental and/or substance use disorders seek help, they are met with the knowledge and belief that anyone can recover and/or manage their conditions successfully.

Outcome-based research, a cornerstone of best practice at Inspira, confirms the value of early and continued participation in recovery-oriented behavioral health treatment. To insure early linkage with needed services, Inspira opened a Therapeutic Nursery Program for the surprisingly high number of children, ages 3 to 5, who struggle with behavioral disorders, often caused by trauma in the formative years. Inspira also operates child and adolescent day and evening partial hospitalization programs to offer acute stabilization options that allow young people to receive daily services, while remaining at home in the family setting. In addition, our Children’s Crisis Intervention Program provides care to children ages 5 to 17 who are in need of immediate inpatient treatment. The renovated 14-bed unit offers group and individual therapy and around-the-clock nursing care.

We at Inspira are committed to improving the lives of all we serve and this means confronting the epidemic of substance abuse and co-occurring mental and addiction disorders. I’m pleased to share that we are opening the region’s first inpatient medical detoxification and addiction program at Inspira Health Center Bridgeton – the only one south of Princeton. It will open later this fall. As part of our commitment, we have chosen to support the distribution to law enforcement the life-saving overdose reversal drug, Narcan. Another initiative is providing to more than 40 community groups, 50,000 Deterra Drug Deactivation Systems, which allow anyone to safely dispose of opioids and other drugs before they can be misused or abused.

Inspira is also diminishing the stigma of mental illness in a significant manner by moving forward with more integrated treatment for behavioral health issues, including addictions. All of the Inspira behavioral health treatment programs are designed to treat physical health, substance use and behavioral health issues concurrently. Simply put, we treat mental health and physical health side-by-side with parity. We bring together the expertise of behavioral health and primary care professionals to create comprehensive, holistic treatment plans that improve patient safety and quality of care. Also, as a member of the South Jersey Behavioral Health Innovation Collaborative, with the four other leading southern New Jersey health networks, we are bringing meaningful and sustainable change to the mental health delivery system in the region, including reducing the effects of stigmatization and providing a higher level of patient care.

Having sufficient mental health services helps meet our healthy communities’ goal in both mental and physical health. In response to the growing needs of our communities, we have continually expanded behavioral health programing. Earlier this year, in recognition of the rapid increase in need for mental health treatment, the New Jersey Department of Health announced the need for 864 new psychiatric inpatient beds statewide, including 108 in our service area of Cumberland, Salem, and Gloucester counties. In August, Inspira was authorized to provide most of those beds. Notably, the new beds approved for the Inspira Elmer campus will be the first psychiatric beds in Salem County. Additional beds will also be added to our Woodbury and Bridgeton campuses.

Inspira has been deeply immersed in mental health treatment for decades and recognizes how much stigmatization hurts the communities we serve. We are continually moving the conversation forward on the path to ending the stigma, supporting families, and enhancing wellness. By creating an open and nonjudgmental care environment, Inspira facilitates more people accepting and receiving help.

www.InspiraHealthNetwork.org