Bridging health care gaps in rural communities

MercyOne Des Moines Behavioral Health continues to Innovate and Improve Daily. The team’s latest initiative, Project ECHO, works to bring together behavioral health providers and primary care physicians in collaboration with the long-term goal of expanding behavioral health knowledge and expertise throughout rural Iowa.

The ECHO model
The ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) model™ was first developed in 2003 by Sanjeev Arora, MD, at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in response to a lack of available rural services for specialty care. To serve as many patients as possible, Dr. Arora created a free educational model and mentored community providers in the specialty treatment of patients. The goal of ECHO is to connect specialists with local practitioners to bridge health care gaps in rural communities.

The ECHO model is not traditional telemedicine, where the specialist assumes care of the patient, but is instead “telementoring” – a guided practice model where the participating clinician retains responsibility for managing the patient.

Dr. Karen Powell, medical director of MercyOne Des Moines Psychiatry Residency Clinic, experienced the ECHO model firsthand during her residency at the University of New Mexico. “Project ECHO brings together the knowledge, resources and creative problem solving of a diverse group of providers. Together, we can tackle very challenging problems,” noted Dr. Powell. “This is especially important in Iowa, as many of our rural communities don’t have many mental health resources available.”

“Our primary care providers want to learn how to better manage their mental health patients themselves, so that they may provide help when other resources may be lacking or lengthy wait times exist,” shared Breanna Young, supervisor of MercyOne Des Moines Psychiatry Residency Clinic. “And typically, patients will return to their primary care providers even if they stop seeking mental help. If we can better prepare primary care providers for treating or helping these patients, it also increases both patient and provider satisfaction.”

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Project ECHO at MercyOne
Currently, the Project ECHO group is working with primary care providers based in Des Moines, with continued efforts to expand the group to rural MercyOne affiliates. Participants currently include Dr. Powell, psychiatry residents, primary care providers, pharmacists, therapists and addictions specialists.

Dr. Laura Abels, a physician participant, recommends Project ECHO. “I love the idea of Project Echo, and the first session...”
2020 5-2-1-0 Health Care Award Recipient

The Iowa Medical Society and the Healthiest State Initiative recently shared MercyOne Family Practice Residency Program was named as a recipient of the 2020 5-2-1-0 Health Care Award. The team’s incredible work to take on innovative approaches to not only continue to support patients and families with healthy habits, but to also engage staff in doing the same was cited as an excellent example of how the medical community can pivot and persevere through times of challenge. MercyOne will be recognized as part of the Healthiest State Initiative 2021 Annual Virtual Awards, broadcast on Feb. 17.

MercyOne Celebrates
YOU
in Year
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On Feb. 1, MercyOne turns two years young and we want to celebrate you — our amazing colleagues and providers.

- Wear green on Feb. 1
- Share a photo using #IamMercyOne on social media for a chance to win
- Join for a blessing on Feb. 1 at 10 a.m. via Zoom or call in: 888.475.4499; Meeting ID: 288 146 6399

See details at MercyOne.org/birthday

Rural communities

was wonderful. Mental health is so important, and getting colleagues and specialists together to talk about cases and bounce ideas off one another is what medicine should be.”

The MercyOne Des Moines Behavioral Health team encourages providers with a specific patient in mind to share with the group through a formal case presentation with both medical and mental health aspects covered. The group format encourages dialogue and learning from both the panel, and the group at large.

After the first group meeting, all of the providers were excited with how the process worked and all that they learned and engaged with other doctors about.

Dr. Valerie Stratton, menopause specialist said, “The opportunity to participate in Project ECHO was very valuable. Not only was it a learning experience in mental health, but a chance to network with my colleagues and specialists from my home during the pandemic.”

If you are interested in joining the Project ECHO group, please contact either Dr. Karen Powell or Breanna Young for more information.