

Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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Contact: 405-248-9232
405-248-9233

OKLAHOMANS REACHING OUT FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH HELP

Officials with the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services say calls to the 211 social services line have increased, and this may actually be a “good” thing as more Oklahomans are reaching out for available help during this stressful time.

ODMHSAS Interim Commissioner Carrie Slatton-Hodges said reaching out for help before a mental health need becomes a crisis is a sign that stigma is lessening and is exactly what the agency wants Oklahomans to do.

“We want people to ask for help,” she said. “The earlier someone recognizes a need for help with growing anxiety or depression, the less likely they are to require advanced treatment later when an unaddressed issue may reach a crisis level. For those who were already struggling with their mental health, the current circumstances can exacerbate problems.”

Although some are assuming an increase in suicides and suicide attempts due to stressors associated with the pandemic, Slatton-Hodges said the department is cautiously optimistic that this will not be realized in Oklahoma due to available services and community partnerships.

“It’s too early to know, but so far, an increase has not been observed, although one Oklahoman’s life lost from suicide is too many. There has definitely been an uptick in calls to crisis hotlines, and the majority of those calls have been related to anxiety, fear and uncertainty concerning the pandemic and everyday stressors – of which there are many at the moment.”

Nationally, call volume at NAMI's HelpLine is up 65 percent compared with last year, averaging more than 200 calls a day. Most calls are related to issues with anxiety.

A recent Kaiser Foundation poll found that more than 30 percent of adults nationally say they’ve experienced symptoms consistent with anxiety or depression. The poll ranked Oklahoma in the top, with 39 percent of adults reporting anxiety or depressive disorder symptoms.

In terms of suicide prevention, Oklahoma has made significant progress, falling from seventh highest nationally in 2016 to 15th in 2018, the latest American Association of Suicidology data available. CDC data indicates that the state ranks 21st in the number of deaths due to suicide.

ODMHSAS has approached suicide prevention at all levels, from grade school through college and in the workplace, by coordinating efforts to partner with various stakeholders including veteran and tribal communities, and with a major emphasis now placed on partnership in emergency rooms and throughout various healthcare settings, said Slatton-Hodges.

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“The work done in recent years to implement preventative strategies and connect people to the right treatment solutions has definitely made a difference,” she said. “We must continue making progress to continue reducing these preventable deaths.”

The agency has implemented a number of technology programs across the state to reach people, and to help them stay connected 24 hours a day. This is especially useful in rural parts of the state where access to physical facilities may be limited, Slatton-Hodges said.

“Anyone who needs mental health assistance, whether for a minor case of anxiety or for a crisis situation, can access a variety of services through the department,” she said. “We want people to stay connected. We can help Oklahomans during this difficult time and show them how to manage anxiety and depression. We can also offer parents, teachers, young people and others education in how to prevent and respond to suicide risk.”

Community providers delivering services as part of the statewide ODMHSAS treatment network have remained open throughout the pandemic. Services are available in person or via telehealth. A link to nearby treatment services can be found by visiting www.odmhsas.org or by calling 211 and asking about behavioral health services. For simple, everyday activities that can help improve your mental health, check-out www.selfcareis.healthcare for short animated videos that can be easily shared via social media.

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Editor’s Note: ODMHSAS always encourages media members to post contact information for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline when publishing/airing topics related to suicide. The Lifeline is accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or online at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.