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Human Services expands access to telehealth services for vulnerable North Dakotans with behavioral health needs during COVID-19 pandemic

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Human Services has expanded access to telehealth services to provide medically-necessary behavioral health services to vulnerable North Dakotans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telehealth services are offered by the department's eight regional behavioral health clinics and four satellite clinics in the state. Each clinic offers behavioral health services focused on chronic disease management and behavioral health crises services.

"Our long-term plan has always been to expand telehealth services at our public behavioral health clinics to better serve individuals where they live," said John Butgereit, statewide telehealth coordinator for the department. "The COVID-19 situation has expedited our efforts and collaboration to prevent the disruption of services for the people we serve and for our team members."

The behavioral health clinics are using software within the department's electronic health records management system called MyAvatar. The video conferencing software, which is Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliant, requires providers to have individual licenses to provide telehealth services.

Butgereit said during the past two months, the number of behavioral health providers at the clinics using telehealth to deliver services grew from 71 to over 350 providers, which include addiction counselors, mental health therapists, psychologists, nurses, prescribers, case managers, skills trainers and emergency service team members.

To access telehealth services, new clients need to complete an initial screening either in person or through the clinics' emergency services teams. The clinics primarily serve individuals with chronic, serious mental illness and substance use disorders, including pregnant women and others who use intravenous drugs. If an individual meets the service level criteria after the initial screening, he or she can begin using telehealth for an assessment by a licensed provider and for future appointments.

One feature of MyAvatar is a virtual waiting room that allows individuals to be matched with a provider from any one of the eight clinics either by waiting for the next available behavioral health provider for an assessment, or by selecting from a list of providers that best matches their needs. Virtual waiting rooms are also used if an individual has a scheduled appointment.

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Individuals can access their appointment with their behavioral health provider using a secure and HIPAA compliant app or a direct web link from their own smartphone, tablet or computer. If individuals do not have access to their own personal electronic devices, each behavioral health clinic has dedicated space for telehealth services where individuals can connect to a department behavioral health professional who is working from a remote location. Individuals who have received services in the past and want to begin receiving services again can contact their clinic to learn about the expanded telehealth options.

"This telehealth technology is helping reduce barriers and better coordinate services, so individuals can maintain their behavioral health treatment or seek help for the first time no matter where they live in the state," Butgereit said.

The department's behavioral health clinics are located in Bismarck, Devils Lake, Dickinson, Fargo, Grand Forks, Jamestown, Minot and Williston with satellite clinics in Grafton, Rolla, Valley City and the Off Main location in Fargo.

The clinics offer services on a sliding fee scale based on an individual's ability to pay. For more information, including a list of crisis phone numbers at each clinic, visit www.nd.gov/dhs/locations/regionalhsc/.

During this time, the behavioral health clinics continue to provide assessments and group and individual therapies while following social distancing and other Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations. Medication delivery and in-home services also continue with team members using personal protective equipment as required.

For details on the state's COVID-19 response, visit www.ndresponse.gov. For more information on COVID-19 behavioral health resources and services, visit www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov/ and www.nd.gov/dhs.

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