Addressing mental health and substance use disorder

Mental health is important to physical health and people’s ability to live a full and productive life. A coordinated and comprehensive system that promotes mental wellbeing, prevents mental illness and substance misuse, and provides access to high-quality and culturally appropriate treatment can improve lives and strengthen our community.

Healthy relationships and environments—at home, school, work, and in the community—support mental well-being. Income, education, housing, and transportation create opportunities—or barriers—to healthy relationships and environments.

Sadly, mental illness and substance use disorder are widespread in Pierce County. The demand for support services exceeds current supply, meaning some people cannot get the help they need.

How can policy promote good mental health?

Decision makers play a critical role in promoting good mental health through the policies they implement and programs they fund. Policy approaches ensure families, communities and providers can access a pathway for emotional wellness and social connection. Policy approaches ensure communities have tools to manage stress and timely services in crises.

Prevention

Prevention policies and programs are cost-effective and essential to reduce mental health illness, substance use disorder, and the problems that occur when untreated. If we get youth the help they need while they’re young, we can save them from a lifetime of pain—or save their lives entirely. Below are examples of evidence-based and emerging strategies Pierce County and others are using to support community wellbeing. Policies that expand, scale, and institutionalize these approaches will help to build a coordinated and comprehensive system that promotes good health for future generations.

Build Trusted Relationships

Positive Parenting Program
Research shows children need a circle of adults they can trust. Safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments can prevent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs can have long-lasting, negative effects on health, well-being, and opportunity. Pierce County and other communities offer the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P), which helps parents around the world become more loving, confident and effective in their parenting style. The evidence-based program promotes safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments.

Nurse Family Partnership
A woman’s health near the time she gives birth can have a long-lasting impact on her child’s emotional health, as well as physical and brain development. Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) empowers first-time moms to create better futures for themselves and their babies. NFP programs are in place in 17 counties in the state, including Pierce. But only a fraction of eligible families in Pierce County have access to this program.

Help Me Grow
Helping families connect to needed supports in a child’s early years builds a foundation for future success. With financial support from the state legislature, Pierce County is piloting this national model. This model uses and builds on existing
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county resources to develop a comprehensive approach to early childhood work. The goal is for all children to be able to grow, develop and thrive to reach their full potential.

**Increase Youth Skills**

**School-based Prevention**
A School-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Curricula approach helps children and youth recognize, name and manage their emotions. Aspects of SEL is happening in districts across Pierce County, but few, if any districts use a comprehensive approach. Research shows successful implementation of SEL programming improves students’ academic outcomes and social emotional skills while reducing emotional distress and drug use.\textsuperscript{v,vi}

**Talk About It**

**Keep Talking Pierce County**
Constant and positive communication is key to prevention and early intervention. Media campaigns like Keep Talking Pierce County urge parents to share their values about alcohol use with children and youth. Keep talking! They are listening.

**StigmaFree**
Stigma prevents people from reporting illness and getting help. Reducing negative views of mental health is important for improved health. StigmaFree is the National Alliance on Mental Illness campaign to end stigma and create hope for those affected by mental illness.\textsuperscript{vii}

**Intervention**
Treatment and management of mental health illness and substance use improves quality of life. Pierce County and counties across the country have made significant investments in mental health and substance use disorder intervention services. Examples of community and clinical models are below.

**School-based Support**
Washington K-12 schools use several early intervention and support service models to address student health. Broadly applying these models can help build a coordinated and comprehensive approach to good health. Some examples of support services offered in Pierce County and neighboring counties include:

- Support for students and families in need with referrals to services and resources like food, clothing and school supplies.
- School-based case managers help identify student needs and connect students and families with services in and out of the education system.
- Approaches to decrease trauma and improve school performance. For example, school staff look for and address the root cause of behavior rather than automatically suspending students faced with challenges.
- Onsite substance use prevention and treatment services in K-12 schools.

**Screen and Respond Early**
Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) trains healthcare providers, teachers, Community Health Workers and others to ask questions and refer people to resources to prevent concerns from turning into health problems. For example, the Potentially Preventable Hospitalization (PPH) project trained 350 medical providers,
community health workers, probation officers and others to perform screenings and help people address substance use disorders and depression.

Training for First Responders
First responders often encounter people in crisis and play an important role in how communities address behavioral health. Broad implementation of training can help responders better understand mental illnesses and de-escalate incidents compassionately and without compromising safety.

Fire Department Cares Model
In Tacoma and cities around the country, Fire Department and Emergency Medical staff receive training to screen, refer and case manage people with complex conditions who are high users of 9-1-1 and other emergency services.

Mental Health Field Response Teams Grant Program
In 2019, the Legislature appropriated $2 million for partnership between law enforcement agencies and mental health professionals to improve mental health field response and diversion from incarceration. Pierce County Sheriff’s Department is the only law enforcement agency in the county to receive a grant. Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs administers the grants.

Addressing Housing Needs Alongside Health Needs
Stable housing is good for health. A Housing First policy approach focuses first on safe shelter and then on treatment needs. Supportive housing combines affordable housing with intensive coordinated services to manage complex physical, mental and social needs. Some regional examples of supportive housing include:

- Orting Veterans Village is a 35 tiny home community for veterans only. Offering more than just a house, it will create community through shared spaces like a multipurpose room, spacious kitchen and dining area. Additional plans include offering care coordination, transportation, mental health therapy, and life skill classes.
- Pendleton Place in Kitsap County is a 72-unit apartment complex under construction. It will use a housing-first model to provide affordable housing with around-the-clock services to people living with chronic homelessness, mental illness and substance-abuse disorders.
- Drexel House II in Thurston County, which Catholic Community Services operates, offers permanent supportive housing and case management for formerly homeless veterans.

Clinical Services
Clinical services are an important component in treating acute and chronic mental illness and addictions. Access to support services is a challenge for many communities. Examples of how Pierce County and others are addressing this problem include:

Mobile Community Intervention Response Team (MCIRT)
In Pierce County, Mobile Community Intervention Response team (MCIRT) responds to, supports and meets the needs of high users of 9-1-1 and other emergency services. Referrals come from first responders and others working with people in crisis.
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Veterans Mental Health Clinic
The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Valley Cities in Lakewood opened March 2019. The facility offers mental health services regardless of discharge status or ability to pay. Services include support to post 9/11 veterans, their families, and families of active duty service members.

New Behavioral Health Hospital
A partnership between MultiCare and CHI Franciscan will offer 120 inpatient beds and serve about 5,000 patients annually in Pierce County. Care will include services for common conditions such as anxiety, severe depression, suicidal tendencies, and others.

Access in Rural Communities
Rural communities face additional barriers to receiving mental health care such as geographic challenges, shortage of services providers and transportation. Telemedicine and other remote health practices can offer a network of mental healthcare and substance use therapy services to rural residents through real-time audio or video calls or one-way at a time messaging.

Pierce County has made significant investments towards treating people living with mental health illness and substance use disorder. To build on these efforts, we need to increase access to support services, reframe people’s perceptions of mental health, and build relationships and environments that support mental wellness. A coordinated and comprehensive mental health system will improve people’s lives and strengthen our community.


