Mental-health professionals encouraged by initiatives

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A statewide initiative to introduce “health homes” for Medicaid patients including perfectly with an increased spotlight nationally for expanded mental health services.

In mid-January, the state Department of Health began assigning lists of names to state-designated health home agencies, which will provide coordinated services for individuals who receive Medicaid benefits for mental health and/or substance abuse and chronic conditions.

Erie County has three groups designated by the state as health homes, each working with a network of dozens of providers to better provide care. That includes Health Home Partners of WNY LLC, led by Baker Victory Services CEO Bruce Nisbet, who said the goal will be to identify which services these individuals need that they’re not currently accessing.

“The health homes are excellent vehicles for expanding the outreach and engagement of people in the community in terms of mental-health services,” he said. “This is a major step forward, but more is needed.”

The advancement of the health homes initiative came just days after a series of mental-health proposals from President Obama promising changes to expand both access to treatment and increased funding for providers. Both come on the heels of the Obama promising $150 million in federal funds to establish a new mental health first-aid training program for teachers, as well as funds to establish a new mental health first-aid training program for teachers, as well as funds to establish a new mental health first-aid training program for teachers, as well as funds to establish a new mental health first-aid training program for teachers, as well as funds to establish a new mental health first-aid training program for teachers, as well as funds to help schools combat violence.

The proposals also support state-based efforts for transition-age young people between 16 and 25; funding to train more than 5,000 mental-health professionals; and to introduce “health homes” for Medicaid patients is being discussed in tandem with gun control and mental health, but it’s unfortunate that these two conversations have to take place together.

“It reinforces negative stereotypes that the mentally ill are violent when, in reality, the truth is they’re more likely to be victims of crime,” he said.

The federal proposals will help professionals do a better job of providing services and educating the public. But so much more funding is needed, he said.

Anne Constantino, president and CEO of Horizon Health Services, said the federal response is good news and takes a step in the right direction, but there’s still lots of work to be done.

She pointed to two important statistics: three-quarters of mental-illness diagnoses come between the ages of 16 and 25; and as many as 50 percent of people with mental-health problems never get treatment. She’s encouraged by the president’s proposal to do more on the front end for identification and referral.

Access to services will be key, including creating innovative delivery methods such as Web-based counseling and telephone support.

“Hopefully we can look at more creative and flexible ways to provide that care that are not that expensive,” she said. “(Treat- ment for) mental-health disorders and substance-abuse disorders are expensive and people need that kind of intensive care.”

Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center is the lead designee for Niagara County’s mental health home.

In support of that project, the hospital has created the Niagara Connections Center, bringing other providers under its roof to offer not only mental health but wellness and social services.

Joseph Buffolo, hospital president, said providers have to be willing to change to better serve this population.

“We’re working together with respect to the people who fall through the cracks now. This brings it all together in kind of a full continuum,” he said.