

Partnering for Behavioral Health Strategies

Overview

In this episode, Dr. Jason Vogler and Dr. Laura Nelson discuss the depth and breadth of Mercer's behavioral health expertise and the critical role of Medicaid as the largest payer of mental health services in the U.S. They explore the complex challenges states face related to care coordination, workforce shortages, and the evolving landscape of behavioral health services, including innovations like telehealth and digital tools.

Key Insights

1. Comprehensive expertise

Mercer's behavioral health team includes licensed clinicians, substance use counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and more, covering the full lifespan and a wide range of behavioral health conditions.

2. Medicaid's critical role

Medicaid is the largest payer of behavioral health services, covering millions with mental illness and substance use disorders, with significantly higher costs for people diagnosed with serious mental illness.

3. Complex challenges

The need to coordinate across multiple state agencies, data sharing challenges, workforce shortages, ongoing stigma realities, and a robust crisis response infrastructure that is still developing can all hamper effective behavioral health care delivery.

4. Emerging Innovation

Growth in telehealth, digital apps, and artificial intelligence (AI), are expanding opportunities but also introduce new challenges.

Current Challenges

- When multiple state agencies/divisions are involved, it can be difficult to align priorities funding, and care coordination efforts.
- Data sharing and real-time collaboration remain limited, complicating care management for members with complex needs.
- Behavioral health workforce shortages persist, with demand exceeding supply.

- Stigma continues to be a barrier to accessing care.
- Crisis response systems need strengthening beyond the 988 hotline.

Advancements & Innovations

- States are benefitting from increased use of telehealth and introduction of digital tools to expand access.
- Development of career pathways can attract and retain credentialed behavioral health and entry-level direct support workers.
- Integration of peer support and peer operated services is a valuable component of care and helps address workforce shortage challenges.
- The growing use of managed care to provide whole-person care for Medicaid members necessitates strong oversight and monitoring by state agencies.

Strategies for States & Payers

1. Enhance cross-agency collaboration

Foster partnerships between Medicaid, behavioral health agencies, and other stakeholders to align policies and coordinate care.

2. Improve data sharing

Invest in interoperable systems to enable real-time data exchange and better care coordination.

3. Expand and upskill workforce

Develop training and career pathways to build an adequate, skilled behavioral health workforce.

4. Strengthen crisis infrastructure

Support expansion of mobile crisis teams and stabilization centers to reduce reliance on emergency departments and criminal justice systems.

5. Leverage funding opportunities

Utilize Medicaid, federal block grant, and state appropriation funding strategically to fill service gaps and support recovery-oriented services.

Why This Matters

Effective behavioral health solutions improve member experiences, reduce costs, and promote recovery and well-being. Collaborative, integrated approaches are essential to meet the growing demand and respond to the complexity of behavioral health needs.

Caveats and Limitations

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For More Information

For tailored support and strategic guidance on advancing behavioral health initiatives, contact [Dr. Laura Nelson](#) or [Dr. Jason Vogler](#), or email us at: mercergovernment@mercerc.com.

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