

December 2024

Lutheran Services Florida: Leading Statewide Innovation in Behavioral Health Management

Introduction

Lutheran Services Florida (LSF), a statewide non-profit organization, has been dedicated to helping the most vulnerable Floridians since 1982. LSF offers support in three key areas: early childhood education through LSF Head Start programs, behavioral health services for the un-and-under-insured through LSF Health Systems (LSFHS), and case management and counseling services for children and families through LSF Family Focus. Their overall mission is to “help communities build healthier, happier, and hope-filled futures,” addressing the needs of individuals facing challenges such as mental health issues, substance use disorder (SUD), family crises, and more.¹

Program Structure and Services

LSF, through LFS Health Systems, is committed to ensuring that every child, adult, and family in Florida has access to behavioral health care services. LSFHS contracts with behavioral health care providers to offer innovative prevention, intervention, treatment, and care coordination that aims to meet this goal. These programs include connecting at-risk individuals to preventive and crisis care through 24/7 Mobile Response Teams, youth-focused Community Action Teams that provide linkages to community supports, and a co-responder

model to respond to behavioral health crises. Initiatives like the Behavioral Health Innovation Summit and Project Save Lives further promote best practices and overdose interventions, establishing LSF as a leader in delivering evidence-based, community-focused behavioral health solutions across the state.

Innovation in Behavioral Health Management

LSF Health Systems

LSF Health Systems is one of seven statewide managing entities that receives funding from the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) to serve the behavioral health needs of clients living in Florida. With an annual operating budget of \$280 million blended from federal, state, and private funding sources, LSFHS plays a vital role in providing a safety net for at-risk populations including when Medicaid coverage is insufficient.² In 2023, LSFHS served over 3.9 million individuals seeking preventive care or treatment for substance use or mental health concerns. Today, LSFHS is the second largest managing entity, overseeing a network of providers spanning 23 counties—covering roughly one-third of the state.

Rather than providing direct care, LSFHS manages an integrated network of 97 healthcare organizations, including hospitals, community mental health centers, and substance use disorder clinics. To support this network, a staff of 65 members at LSFHS monitors the quality of care provided through a variety of oversight and monitoring tools. LSFHS also ensures that the services provided at partner healthcare organizations are evidence-based and are tailored to the diverse needs of both rural and urban communities.

Mobile Response and Community Action Teams

LSFHS has implemented various innovative programs to address the growing behavioral health crisis in Florida, particularly focusing on crisis intervention in coordination with the state's "No Wrong Door Approach" to behavioral health care. This approach seeks to provide appropriate services for those with behavioral health challenges at all points of access.³ For example, LSFHS operates 24/7 Mobile Response Teams (MRT), that provide immediate response to individuals experiencing behavioral health crises. LSF's community action teams (CAT) for youth are designed to provide safe and effective alternatives to out-of-home placements for youth with serious behavioral health conditions. These community action teams utilize an integrated service delivery approach that includes behavioral health clinicians, case managers, and other support staff. CAT teams provide family-centered behavioral health care and care coordination as well as transportation assistance, and other referrals/linkages to health-related social needs.⁴

Co-Responder Program

In December 2020, LSFHS was awarded a technical assistance grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to disseminate best practices that help network providers plan

for and achieve desired health outcomes for their patients.⁵ Through the grant, LSFHS was specifically able to scale-up a co-responder model that was piloted in Alachua and Duval counties. This model partners law enforcement officers and behavioral health specialists working in the LSFHS network to jointly respond to behavioral health related calls. These partnerships can help de-escalate behavioral health crises but can also provide a mechanism to begin behavioral health screenings, assessments, and referrals to needed services. The program is designed to divert individuals experiencing behavioral health crises away from the justice system when appropriate, increasing connections to behavioral health resources. Additionally, the program has realized cost savings by making law enforcement more available for non-behavioral-health-related 911 calls.⁶

The program has seen great success, with 91% of individuals who could have been arrested, instead, being diverted to non-judicial resources and services.⁷

Fostering Further Innovation Through Partnership

Behavioral Health Innovation Summit

In 2019, LSFHS launched a Behavioral Health Innovation Summit to encourage network providers and leaders in Florida to share best practices and practical approaches to tackling behavioral health issues in the state. The Innovation Summit led to recognition of organizations like the Sulzbacher Center in Jacksonville for its Chronically Homeless Offenders Program (CHOP) that diverts individuals dealing with mental health issues away from the justice system and into temporary housing. Sulzbacher's CHOP program offers services related to substance use treatment, employment training, and peer counseling.⁸

LSFHS believes that recognizing innovative solutions to Florida’s behavioral health challenges can help spread and scale innovation across the state.

Project Save Lives

LSFHS also participates in Project Save Lives (PSL), which stations peer specialists with lived experience in emergency departments to intervene when patients present with drug overdoses. This program was facilitated in part by LSFHS’s receipt of a grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in 2016 to establish a first-in-state Certified Recovery Peer Specialist training and certification program.⁹ Due to the success of the program, LSFHS has expanded from their initial sites in Jacksonville to other hospitals and sites in northeast Florida. In 2022, the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) recognized the program’s effectiveness in helping reduce the drug overdose death rate and associated costs in participating hospitals.¹⁰

Uplift Communities

LSFHS’s faith-based initiative, Uplift Communities, focuses on integrating faith-based leaders with community behavioral health resources in rural communities. The initiative trains faith leaders on behavioral health issues so they can help members of their congregation who live with mental health and/or substance use disorders. Behavioral health organizations can share their resources and services to assist faith leaders with congregational needs. Other states are requesting presentations of this

model for replication, as rural communities in particular struggle with lack of behavioral health resources and turn to faith leaders for help.

Revenue and Financials

Addressing Challenges in Behavioral Health Financing

According to Mental Health America, Florida ranks 40th in the nation for access to behavioral health services and towards the bottom in state funding for behavioral health services.¹¹ Under the current 13-year contract with the state, which has been renewed several times and is currently set to expire at the end of June 2025, the state has provided LSFHS with over \$2.2 billion in funding to date.¹² While state DCF funding accounts for roughly 97% of LSFHS’s funding for behavioral health, LSFHS has nonetheless, been proactive in securing grants including more than \$35 million from SAMHSA, HRSA, and private foundations, including the Florida Blue Foundation.¹³

LSFHS’s has also partnered with other MCOs to expand services. In 2023, LSFHS received a \$20,000 grant from Humana Healthy Horizons, to support enhanced training for wellness recovery action planning, applied suicide intervention skills, and verbal de-escalation/compassion fatigue for the MRT program.¹⁴

As part of a safety net system, LSFHS-contracted providers are reimbursed for services by Medicaid; 93% of children’s services qualify for Medicaid reimbursement while LSFHS subsidizes and covers the remaining 7%. DCF and AHCA are discussing ways to blend and braid their respective funds to better serve Florida’s burgeoning population. The Florida Chamber of Commerce reports there are 750 new residents moving to Florida every day.

Braided and blended funding would allow LSF to pool resources from multiple funding streams, overcoming the current limitations that restrict how state funds from DCF can be used. Blended funding could enable LSFHS to expand services for high utilizers of care, improve crisis response capabilities, and close gaps where Medicaid coverage is not sufficient.

LSFHS has worked with the state to identify three areas for which additional dedicated funds from the state would be helpful in addressing behavioral health needs: workforce recruitment and retention, care and housing coordination support, and expansions for the co-responder program. For example, an additional \$3.6 million in funds would expand LSFHS's ability to provide care coordination for another 500 youth and adults with behavioral health needs.¹⁵

Performance Measurement and Evaluation

As part of their contract with the state, LSFHS and other managing entities are required to rapidly respond to community needs and amend contracts with service providers as needed to ensure that high-quality care is delivered. LSFHS ensures the quality of care by conducting regular quality assurance reviews including focus groups and satisfaction surveys.¹⁶ LSFHS gives their contracted providers various tools and resources to help them adhere to best practices and to document progress.¹⁷ The organization has also successfully kept administrative overhead to less than 5% of their total budget.

LSFHS plans to have providers document the number of diversions from acute care and criminal justice systems, the percent of individuals engaged in services, as well as total system cost savings resulting from the program to collect outcomes data supporting their

request for additional funds to expand the co-responder program.¹⁸ LSFHS already requires providers to report DCF mandated performance outcome measures for other substance use and mental health services. This reporting includes measures such as the percent of adults and children with substance use and mental health conditions who live in stable housing, as well as the percent of adults and children who successfully complete substance use treatment.¹⁹

According to their most recent impact report, LSFHS contracted providers were able to secure 92% of adults with severe and persistent mental illnesses with stable housing, surpassing the network goal of 85%. In addition, 89% of children receiving LSFHS network substance use services completed treatment, surpassing the network goal of 48%.²⁰

Conclusion

Lutheran Services Florida plays a critical role in supporting some of the state's most vulnerable populations. Through its programs in behavioral health, early childhood education, and family support, LSF is making significant strides toward improving the lives of hundreds of thousands of Floridians. However, challenges remain, particularly with securing adequate funding and navigating the complexities of Medicaid reimbursement. Despite these hurdles, LSF continues to explore innovative solutions to ensure that they meet the growing needs of the communities they serve.

Endnotes

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