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Lutheran Social Services of Illinois: Advancing Family-Centered Behavioral Health Care

Introduction

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI) has a longstanding history of serving the people of Illinois, having provided essential services since 1867. With approximately 1,100 staff members and an annual operating budget of roughly \$142 million, LSSI is one of the largest statewide social service providers in Illinois. Each year, the organization reaches approximately 50,000 individuals through its comprehensive programs, which focus on three primary service networks: behavioral health, services for seniors and people with disabilities, and children's community services, a division that focuses on therapeutic foster care and family support programs. LSSI focuses its services on people with low incomes; in 2023, 91% of individuals served by LSSI had annual incomes below \$25,000, and 71% had incomes below \$5,000 per year.¹

Program Structure and Services

LSSI's Behavioral Health Division provides substance use treatment, mental health services, and crisis intervention, offering both outpatient and residential services. The behavioral health division aims to provide community-based support and to reduce reliance on emergency services and inpatient care.² LSSI also operates a Coordinated Community Mental Health Care

team, which includes a mobile crisis team and outpatient mental health therapy services. LSSI's approach to mental health care extends beyond traditional case management by offering care coordination. This coordination includes linking clients to resources, addressing barriers to accessing services such as connecting individuals to mental health group homes, and providing other recovery and reintegration services.³ Outside of the Behavioral Health Division, LSSI also provides support for special populations such as children with severe behavioral challenges.

Illinois Health Practice Alliance

LSSI is a founding member of the Illinois Health Practice Alliance (IHPA), a clinically-integrated provider network to improve the management and coordination of behavioral and physical health care for Medicaid beneficiaries. IHPA was developed to transform Illinois' outpatient behavioral health network, maximizing value for its owners and payer partners through MCO contracts, ultimately positioning IHPA as the provider of choice for Medicaid outpatient behavioral health services.

Project IMPACT

LSSI has developed a range of behavioral health programs that address substance use disorder, mental health needs, and crisis situations. Of note, the organization operates Project IMPACT (Inter Multi-Disciplinary Prescreening Assessment Crisis Team), a program that places counselors in emergency rooms at five hospitals in the Chicago area. These counselors conduct assessments and provide crisis management services for individuals experiencing mental health or substance use emergencies.

When notified by emergency room staff, a counselor meets with an individual, assesses their needs, determines appropriate next steps—such as referral to inpatient care or outpatient follow-up—and provides referrals to additional resources, including food, shelter, and benefits assistance. The program aims to reduce unnecessary psychiatric hospitalizations by connecting individuals to appropriate outpatient care and community resources. During fiscal year 2024, Project Impact handled over 8,200 referrals, primarily from the Chicago Fire Department, self-referrals, and other outreach efforts. Roughly 46% of the clients served were covered by Medicaid managed care organizations (MCOs).⁴ The remaining 54% is a mixture of Medicare, Medicaid, commercial/private insurance, Veterans Affairs benefits, and a portion that is unfunded.

Therapeutic Foster Care

In 2016, following a competitive grant process, LSSI was selected as one of four providers by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to deliver a Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) program in Cook, Aurora, and Rockford; Illinois.⁵ The initiative falls under the Child Welfare network of LSSI. The program is funded through a daily rate provided by DCFS, however, LSSI also bills Medicaid for therapeutic services provided by therapists and skills coaches in the program.

Through this initiative, LSSI serves children aged 6-17 with severe behavioral challenges who would otherwise be placed in residential care. The TFC program aims to keep children within their communities and with their families, avoiding group homes, hospitals, or other institutions. Children referred to TFC typically come from psychiatric hospitals, residential facilities, or foster care. Each child is matched with a TFC foster parent and a professional team that provides intensive, individualized interventions to further positive social behaviors in home, school, and community settings.

The pilot's success was demonstrated through a significant reduction in time spent in costly residential care settings, resulting in an estimated cost savings of \$51,058 over two years. Seventy-seven percent of children discharged from LSSI's therapeutic foster care program successfully transitioned to planned aftercare families, exceeding the average success rate for similar programs.

Additionally, children in the TFC program were more likely to be discharged to home-based care compared to those not in the program.⁶ Given the success of this initiative, LSSI is working on renegotiating their contract with DCFS to move towards a more sustainable model.

Successful Partnerships with Medicaid to Advance Value-Based Care

LSSI, along with other members of the IHPA are committed to streamlining contracting, adopting value-based incentives, and giving providers access to claim, payment, and performance data.

These efforts help providers to understand the impacts of their care compared to national and network benchmarks in real-time and increase efficiencies in provision of care by identifying effective care strategies. IHPA, and by extension LSSI, collaborates with several MCOs, including Centene, Meridian, County Care, and Aetna, to offer Medicaid-covered services. Through its involvement in IHPA, LSSI focuses on reducing the total cost of care for high emergency department and inpatient psychiatric utilizers by meeting performance goals based on Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS) metrics.

LSSI is assigned a list of clients from IHPA, and provides outpatient counseling and therapy, group and family therapy, assertive and comprehensive community treatment, social determinants of health referrals and management, among other services. Primary health care services are also available through federally qualified health center (FQHC) partners.

IHPA operates under a value-based care model, which rewards LSSI and over 100 other community-based behavioral health partners in three distinct ways. IHPA partners are rewarded individually for meeting set performance metrics and receive a shared savings payment if IHPA as a whole reduces total cost of care for patients. Additionally, through having an ownership share, LSSI also receives a dividend distribution.

IHPA's model is quite successful, helping significantly improve members' HEDIS measurements. From 2021-2023, most of IHPA's HEDIS ratings, including the percentage of inpatient discharges for a diagnosis of mental illness among patients 6 or older that resulted in follow-up care with a mental health provider within 7 and 30 days, were in the 90th percentile nationally for at least two of the partnered MCOs.⁷ Additionally, within the first year of operation, IHPA providers saw a 32% improvement in completed care transitions and a 41% improvement in completed health risk assessments.⁸

Project On-Ramp

LSSI continues to leverage existing partnerships to offer innovative programming. LSSI participates in Project On-Ramp, an IHPA-designed program and an add-on to their existing contract with IHPA. Funded by a Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services grant since 2021, this initiative helps high-utilizers of hospital and emergency departments who are members of Aetna Better Health of Illinois and Meridian Health Plan Medicaid managed care get proactive care for their chronic conditions in outpatient settings rather than in hospitals and emergency departments. This effort leverages IHPA's network of behavioral health and physical health providers as well as connections with social service organizations to address patients health and health-related social needs in a comprehensive integrated manner. This member-driven model works by giving providers access to years of claims data that helps identify past service utilization and trends which allows providers the flexibility to tailor care and meet the needs of each patient. Targeted members receive assertive transition support following discharge

from hospitals and emergency departments as well as follow-up and support regarding substance use disorder treatment. Members are also assessed for HRSNs and are provided with referrals and case management to address those needs. MCO provided flexible spending stipends are given to providers. These stipends can be used to directly pay for food, rent, and other health-related social needs that patients may have. Providers are also reimbursed through an alternative payment model that compensates them for achieving specific clinical quality metrics, including those related to HRSNs and various HEDIS measures.

Although, IHPA's main focus is behavioral health, the alliance, through training, educational resources, and care collaboration, has improved the capabilities of all providers in the network to address physical chronic conditions, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease.⁹ Utilizing IHPA's integrated network, members have been able to avoid ED utilization and inpatient admissions at greater levels than their peers with similar chronic conditions.

Project On-Ramp saw promising results following its pilot launch in 2020, with a 72% reduction in all-cause ED visits, a 62% reduction in inpatient behavioral health stays, and a 60% reduction in per-member per-month total cost of care for pilot members.¹⁰

Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics

LSSI is establishing a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) with funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).¹¹ CCBHCs

provide nine core services—including crisis intervention, outpatient mental health and substance use treatment, screening, diagnosis, risk assessment, and targeted case management—operating 24/7 and offering care regardless of an individual's ability to pay.

CCBHCs are models of integrated care, and generally encompass numerous practice settings and sites. CCBHCs have been shown to significantly increase access to behavioral health care for underserved populations. As of October 2024, LSSI's CCBHC started receiving Medicaid payments based on a prospective payment system that is designed to cover the CCBHC's anticipated costs throughout the year and will allow for flexibility to provide services that have not been traditionally reimbursed by Medicaid that help address patients' health-related social needs. This further highlights LSSI's commitment to being a trusted community leader and their willingness to take risks to improve health outcomes in the state.

Challenges and Future Directions

LSSI faces several challenges in its mission to provide comprehensive social services, including staffing shortages and difficulties in finding appropriate placements for clients with complex needs. The organization has also experienced high turnover in staffing its overnight crisis response services, which operates 24 hours a day. Despite these challenges, LSSI has maintained a commitment to quality through adherence to performance metrics and value-based care reimbursement models.

Looking forward, LSSI plans to expand its role as a leading provider of behavioral health services in Illinois by launching additional programs, such as the CCBHC, and increasing its participation in value-based care models.

LSSI's CCBHC has gone through several financial evolutions, transitioning from grant-based to fee for services and now a daily encounter rate. Moving forward, LSSI is trying to build shared savings concepts into new programming. Through partnerships with MCOs and community organizations, LSSI aims to continue containing healthcare costs while improving patient outcomes for underserved populations.

Conclusion

LSSI stands out as a vital social service provider that integrates behavioral health, child welfare, and community support services to address the needs of vulnerable populations in the state of Illinois. Beyond LSSI's focus on innovation and partnerships, their strategic plan emphasizes ensuring that staff feel engaged, respected, and supported. LSSI's strong focus on innovation, evidence-based practices, partnerships and strong staffing allows LSSI to be well-positioned to adapt to the changing healthcare landscape while continuing to make a positive impact on the communities it serves.

Endnotes

- 1 Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). <https://www.lssi.org/>
- 2 Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). Mental Health and Addiction Services. <https://www.lssi.org/services/mental-health-and-addiction-services/?cn-reloaded=1>
- 3 Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). Care Coordination. <https://www.lssi.org/services/mental-health-and-addiction-services/mental-health-services/care-coordination/>
- 4 Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). Project IMPACT. <https://www.lssi.org/services/mental-health-and-addiction-services/mental-health-services/project-impact/>
- 5 Illinois Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) Pilot Evaluation, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Chapin-Hall.DCFS-TFC-Combined-Evaluation-Report.pdf>
- 6 Illinois Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) Pilot Evaluation, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Chapin-Hall.DCFS-TFC-Combined-Evaluation-Report.pdf>
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- 8 Health Plan Partners. IHPA. <https://www.ilhealthpracticealliance.com/for-our-health-plan-partners.html>
- 9 IHPA Project On-Ramp Transformation Proposal. HFS. 2021. <https://hfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/hfs/healthcaretransformation/documents/a02ihpaprojectonramp.pdf>
- 10 IHPA Project On-Ramp Transformation Proposal. HFS. 2021. <https://hfs.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/hfs/healthcaretransformation/documents/a02ihpaprojectonramp.pdf>
- 11 LSSI Receives Federal Funding to Launch Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic. April 2023, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). <https://www.lssi.org/lssi-receives-federal-funding-to-launch-certified-community-behavioral-health-clinic/>



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