

Concerns that AHS IOP/PHP Screens Potential Clients for Treatment

There was concern expressed at the Board of Trustees 7/23/20 Quality Professional Services Committee meeting that AHS's IOP/PHP programs might not accept people who are homeless or with substance abuse issues. This concern seems to represent a misunderstanding about what actual mental health treatment is.

First, AHS's IOP/PHP does accept and currently works with homeless people and those with substance abuse issues when it is determined that these people will be able to benefit from treatment. However, as an actual treatment program, IOP/PHP should screen people to see if they can actually benefit from treatment. A well informed concern would be if we did *not* screen people, because if we did not then we probably would not be able to provide effective treatment.

To make sense of this for non-mental health clinicians, it is worth taking a look at what treatment means for homeless people. I have worked professionally with homeless people for many years. Almost every chronic homeless person is struggling with either severe trauma, substance abuse, or mental illness – often all three at once. (Many people go in and out of homelessness for purely economic reasons, but for those that are chronically homeless, this is mostly the case.)

Let's start with trauma treatment: trauma treatment is not appropriate when the trauma is still occurring (in fact the treatment can be traumatizing in itself if the trauma is still taking place). Being homeless is a traumatizing experience. It is a time when an individual needs to focus on protection and survival, not on opening up deep emotional wounds. The first step in working with homeless people is to work to stabilize their lives and provide safety. This means, first and foremost, to find stable and safe housing. Therefore, when homeless people are presented to our clinics for treatment, our first focus is to help them find safe and stable housing, which might mean working conjointly with other agencies that specialize in housing.

Substance abuse treatment is its own unique type of mental health treatment, which is why there are specialty substance abuse treatment facilities. It is a truism in substance abuse treatment that you do not work on underlying causes of an addiction while there is active substance abuse. Substance abuse is primarily about the avoidance of difficult feelings and this runs counter to effective mental health treatment. When a person shows up for treatment at our clinic with a primary substance abuse issue, we work to conjointly enroll him or her in substance abuse treatment. We often work with clients in our clinic while they are also receiving specialty substance abuse treatment, but we know that until their addiction is under control there will not be any effective mental health treatment addressing underlying causes.

AHS's IOP/PHP are very high quality and effective mental health treatment programs. While we do provide some housing support and substance abuse treatment in our groups, these are not our specialties. Other places specialize in case management and substance abuse treatment. Every clinic cannot do everything and do it well.

While wellness centers modeled on the County Wellness Center model do accept almost everyone and are a valuable resource in our community, they can only in the most superficial sense be thought of as providing treatment. These are drop-in peer and intern run socialization centers. They can and do provide a good place for someone to get social contact, be introduced to coping skills, and perhaps

begin the process of accessing effective treatment. However, without being able to provide an effective therapeutic container (i.e. the same selected and appropriate people in the same group over a period of time led by a seasoned therapist), wellness centers cannot provide effective mental health treatment and thus often end up referring their patients to IOP/PHP.

It is not a problem that AHS's mental health services screen potential clients. Every section of AHS screens potential clients to direct them to the appropriate care. AHS's IOP/PHP program is a highly effective mental health treatment program and, in order for this to be true, we screen potential clients.