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Human Services launches enhanced crisis response services to help North Dakotans in times of need

Includes three-digit crisis line (211), mobile response and walk-in stabilization services

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Human Services, through its eight regional human service centers, has launched a comprehensive behavioral health crisis response system to provide help and support 24-hours a day, seven days a week to North Dakotans who are experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge, or other emotional situation. The initiative also includes crisis response services for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities through the Life Skills and Transition Center (LSTC) in Grafton.

“Over the past two years, we have made great strides in strengthening the state’s behavioral health continuum of care by creating a standardized crisis response delivery system,” said department Executive Director Chris Jones. “One of our key priorities is to provide services closer to home and these services ensure people receive the right services, in the right location and at the right time.”

The enhanced services include a three-digit crisis line (211) that anyone can call for help, including law enforcement and other first responders who are helping individuals in stressful situations. Some reasons to call could include substance use, depression, suicidal thoughts, trauma, relationship conflict, concerns for loved ones or other challenges.

Clinically trained specialists provide confidential support and try to resolve the crisis over the phone. If it requires an in-person response, a team of behavioral health professionals will meet an individual where he or she is to provide stabilization, resolution and other supportive services.

The mobile response services are provided within a 45-mile radius of the state’s eight largest cities. The services can be provided in a person’s home, work location or other community setting. For individuals outside the 45-mile radius, the mobile response team connects by phone for support, assessment and crisis psychotherapy, and if the situation is unresolved, recommend treatment at the nearest critical access hospital. The human service centers are actively working to create memorandums of understanding with North Dakota critical access hospitals to provide these services through telehealth in rural communities outside the 45-mile radius.

“The focus of these services is to help individuals facing a crisis get help quickly, to meet them where they are comfortable, and to provide support to avoid unnecessary law enforcement involvement, emergency room use or inpatient hospitalization,” said Rosalie Etherington, Ph.D., chief clinic director for the human service centers.

In addition, the human service centers are repurposing existing residential units that provide long-term treatment services into 24-hour stabilization facilities that focus on short-term intervention and treatment services. Once fully operational, individuals will be able to walk into a facility, receive an

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assessment and get services that best meets their needs, which could include a referral to a treatment provider for appropriate services.

Efforts are underway to fully develop the stabilization facilities and services in the coming months, as some regions are working to remodel existing buildings to accommodate the new treatment model.

All human service centers also offer daytime walk-in assessments Monday through Friday during regular business hours to serve individuals with behavioral health emergencies.

"This is a monumental shift in how we best serve people in crisis," said Jeff Stenseth, field services operations officer. "While some regions have been offering these services for some time, we gradually enhanced them throughout the state over the past year. We are hearing from law enforcement and other first responders that the more robust services are making a difference in their communities."

Also included in the initiative is a specialized developmental disabilities crisis response team who supports individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

"Our team of crisis coordinators and applied behavior analysts work closely with the regional mobile response teams. When someone in crisis has a disability, we are called to provide stabilization, support and service coordination within 24-hours of the initial call to 211," said Sue Foerster, LSTC superintendent. "We also provide support and training to developmental disability service providers and families throughout the state."

These enhanced services are available 24-hours a day, seven days a week, on weekends and holidays to all North Dakotans, not just individuals who receive services through the human service centers. A sliding fee schedule is available based on an individual's ability to pay, and insurance is accepted if available.

During the 2019 legislative session, North Dakota lawmakers authorized funding and additional full-time positions to enhance 24-hour emergency and crisis services. The enhancements are a result of the 2018 Human Services Research Institute's report that examined the state's behavioral health system to prevent and respond to behavioral health challenges and promote the well-being of North Dakotans. In January 2020, the department contracted with FirstLink 211 for the phone support services.

The department's regional human service centers are located in Bismarck, Devils Lake, Dickinson, Fargo, Grand Forks, Jamestown, Minot and Williston with satellite clinics in Grafton, Rolla and Valley City.

For more information on the crisis response services, visit www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov/crisis.

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