



Four County hosts Kansas Lieutenant Governor Lynn Rogers

July 23, 2019

Greg Hennen, Executive Director of Four County, welcomed community partners from law enforcement, education, healthcare, and Montgomery County Action Council to the Four County campus earlier today as Lt. Gov. Lynn Rogers participated in a listening tour. The roundtable discussion offered an opportunity to highlight the needs and challenges of providing mental health and substance abuse treatment to citizens in Southeast Kansas. Hennen began by highlighting two important facts: Four County offers 42 different programs as part of its broad service array for patients. Additionally, over 8,200 citizens or 1 in 4 residents of Montgomery County have received one or more mental health services from Four County in the past 5 years.

The Lt. Governor listened as professionals presented and outlined some of the current barriers to addressing the mental health crisis in Southeast Kansas. Steve Denny, Clinical Director of Four County, emphasized that Substance Use Disorders are present in the community at epidemic proportions, and the effects of addiction are felt in all communities. "Methamphetamines are easy to come by, inexpensive, and flowing through this area; additionally, the Opioid Crisis is very real," Denny added. Several noted that childhood trauma has far-reaching negative effects on the human lifespan and seems to be on the rise. It is estimated that 80% of all primary medical care visits have an underlying mental health concern. The judiciary, law enforcement, and court services attendees highlighted that on average, 50% of court dockets are made up of addiction-related crimes. The issues are pervasive and the total costs to society and citizens are difficult to capture.

Rusty Arnold, Superintendent of USD 446, reported "15% of school children have excessive absenteeism. Trauma associated with absentee and disengaged parents places tremendous strain on kids' ability to learn. And, as the kids grow up, that trauma has lifelong impacts on their success." Healthcare administrators noted that hospitals and community mental health centers are struggling to recruit and retain licensed professionals in psychiatry and psychology/social work and these organizations are seeing shrinking or stagnant reimbursements which further erode the ability to treat those in need. These are systemic issues that have significant impacts!

There were bright spots during the discussion as well. CMHCs and area hospitals are partnering to keep patients and staff safe in the midst of greatly reduced hospital beds across the state. Court systems are finding ways to deal with very full dockets, including a creative partnership between the 19th Judicial District, the Community Health Center and Four County in the Winfield/Ark City region. School districts are engaging with kids and parents when home issues are interfering with class work through school collaborations with CMHCs. These and other efforts are breaking down some of the stigma that can be associated with seeking mental health treatment. Technology is being used creatively to serve needs in rural populations. And, providers are working harder than ever to identify and support families in crisis and dealing with trauma.

Matt Atteberry, Executive Director of Labette Mental Health Center, highlighted the unique nature of being a Community Mental Health Center. “More and more, we are a specialty care provider like a cardiologist or oncologist; however, we also have an obligation to be available 24/7, 365 days of the year like an Emergency Room. There are big pressures on our system to succeed in this environment.”

Brian Williams of Labette Medical Center, offered the view that Medicaid Expansion would be one tool that nearly every system represented in the room would benefit from; it is estimated that rural hospitals could see an influx of \$2-\$3 million annually if Medicaid Expansion were to pass in Kansas. Representative Jim Kelly encouraged Lt. Gov. Rogers to look at provider reimbursements, especially in the area of telemedicine and Hennen emphasized the point stating “Even our reimbursable codes are not sufficient to cover costs; when you further reduce those because we are in the behavioral health arena, it is not sustainable.” Jodi Hayse of Four County offered the following, “Frequently, the patients who most need our care are those least able to pay for it. The system in place for accessing mental health care is complicated, and without appropriate social supports, many patients may be unable to access the care they need.”

Kyle Kessler, Executive Director of the Association of Community Mental Health Center of Kansas, summed up the discussion in closing, “The mental health care system faces challenges on the fronts of finances, workforce recruitment and retention, and clinical treatment. Oklahoma and Missouri are direct competitors for staff and have the advantage of having implemented the Community Behavioral Health Care designation (and gaining associated Federal funds) that Kansas opted not to pursue during the last administration. We have missed that opportunity; anything that could put more dollars in our system now would certainly help.”

Four County Mental Health Center is celebrating its 55th year in service and its 5th year in being the county-designated mental health provider in Cowley County. It is a private, not-for-profit, healthcare organization dedicated to providing accessible, innovative services in partnership with individuals, families and our communities.