

CASE STUDY

Leveraging Technology to Provide Mental Health Care Amidst COVID-19

Options has achieved a **90% follow-up rate** for behavioral health clients after an ED visit and kept engagement high during COVID-19

“The barriers to folks taking care of their physical health really has to do with the barriers to mental and emotional health. So, it’s important to give people tools and support them in ways that go beyond their medical and physical health.”

- Lara Barnes, M.Ed., LMFT

Behavioral Health Director, Options
Counseling & Family Services

Options Counseling & Family Services

Options Counseling and Family Services provides mental and behavioral health care to individuals and families throughout Oregon, with services in eleven counties in the state. Options is committed to providing high-quality and cost-effective care for the people it serves—which means finding ways to support vulnerable clients despite the unprecedented uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Challenge: Protecting Both Physical & Mental Health

Prior to COVID-19, approximately one in five¹ adults in the United States experienced mental illness in a given year. However, the pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of nearly half² of US adults, according to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Fears of getting sick, the emotional weight of isolation, and high levels of unemployment have all contributed to this mental and emotional toll. In the weeks after coronavirus hit the US economy, more than 37 million³ people filed unemployment claims and the national unemployment rate spiked to 14.7 percent⁴ in April 2020. Unemployment can have significant impacts on one’s mental health, with one study finding that every 1 percent⁵ increase in the national unemployment rate was correlated with a 4.1 percent increase in the suicide rate.

For Options, finding ways to continue providing mental health and crisis intervention services while keeping clients, staff, and the surrounding community safe quickly became top priority.

The Outcomes: A Rapid Transition to Teletherapy

Options originally turned to Collective Medical to build out supports for clients experiencing crises and accessing emergency healthcare services. That touch point provided by the platform extended into creating a solutions-driven COVID-19 response.

In just ten days, Options was able to move 98-99 percent of its workforce to remote telehealth. To help transition individuals and families to teletherapy, staff created video tutorials on logging into the telehealth platform, sent emails and physical mail, made resources available in both English and Spanish, and ensured individual case managers were available to help problem solve if needed.

Collective's reports helped case managers identify clients that may have been in need of additional support and reach out to families and individuals they hadn't heard from or who were uncertain about telehealth or telephone appointments. Real-time data also helped facilitate meaningful communication with other members of a client's care team. Lara Barnes, M.Ed., LMFT, and Behavioral Health Director at Options Counseling and Family Services explains:

"We're getting daily reports and doing outreach to clients, especially some of those harder to reach clients. And we're able to reach out to their other providers to coordinate care. For example, we've had primary care doctors call us if they're seeing a spike in concerning behaviors or mental health symptoms. This ongoing communication enables us to problem solve with each of those safety-net providers in our client's lives."

To ensure people were receiving necessary care, Options assessed barriers that prevented families and individuals from taking the next

step towards having a face-to-face connection with their provider through telehealth. Barnes continues:

"We want to make sure that clients are able to better participate in telehealth by making their home therapy space conducive to engaging in a therapeutic relationship like our office space would be. So that meant figuring out practical, barrier-busting solutions and making sure folks have the ability to be connected."

These solutions included sending out dozens of tablets, offering to pay for a couple months of additional internet bandwidth, and mailing helpful items such as headphones and ethernet cords. It also meant looking outside of teletherapy appointments by providing community support and activities, making space to have conversations with clinicians and encouraging them to do the same with clients, and even developing a humorous wear-a-mask campaign to help keep the community safe.

Outcomes: Staying Connected & Engaged

While the micromovements seen in clients with anxiety or subtle responses from family members may not be completely clear over video, clinicians at Options have found benefit in being able to see clients' lived experiences through video calls. Barnes explains:

"We may have previously said a remote session isn't as effective as an in-person session and now we're challenging those assumptions. Telehealth actually gives us the opportunity to be where they are and see their environment."

By understanding that a client may live in a chaotic household or lack private space, it more easily allows clinicians to adjust their intervention and better cater to the needs of each individual or family. In return, clients are able to better engage with clinicians. Barnes continues:

“After the initial transition over the first couple of weeks, we’ve seen an incredible engagement. Clients are generally more engaged. They’re attending sessions more regularly and there are fewer and fewer cancellations, in part because the barrier of arranging childcare or transportation is now gone.”

In addition to keeping engagement high, Options has been able to leverage the Collective platform to achieve a 90 percent follow-up rate for behavioral health clients after an emergency department visit—meaning Options is there to support vulnerable individuals after they experience a crisis and can help prevent avoidable ED visits and readmissions in the future.

1. <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/adults-reporting-any-mental-illness-in-the-past-year/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22collId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>
2. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>
3. <https://blogs.bls.gov/blog/2020/06/03/how-many-unemployed-people-comparing-survey-data-and-unemployment-insurance-counts/>
4. <https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/civilian-unemployment-rate.htm#>
5. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2190/CC3D-Q2YG-P7AV-Y8FJ>

About Collective Medical

Collective Medical provides the nation’s largest and most effective ADT-based network for care collaboration. Our risk-adjusted event notification and care collaboration platform spans across all points of care—including hospitals, payers, behavioral and physical ambulatory, and post-acute settings.

Collective’s platform helps identify at-risk, complex patients and share actionable, real-time information with diverse care teams across the network, leading to better care decisions.