

Background

Behavioral Health Care on the South Coast is a complex, fragmented system that often does not meet the demand for mental health and substance abuse services in our region. As a result, our communities face significant struggles such as high rates of substance abuse, depression, suicide and other serious behavioral health issues. Providers, including Southcoast Health and our wide network of community partners, struggle with developing the best patient resources; and more importantly, to ensure those resources reach patients in the right place at the right time.

The statistics tell a concerning story

- Across the South Coast, our Emergency Departments (ED) see an average of 36 new behavioral health patients every single day. Our community partners also face a high demand for services and often, there is as much as a 90-day wait for follow up care.
- Many patients seeking care in our EDs are repeat visitors who return after experiencing a “break” in their ongoing care and as a result are in behavioral health crisis.
- Our inpatient unit, the only one of its kind in the region, operates at 97 percent capacity, with over 1300 admissions in our most recent year.
- Many community providers report that while strapped to meet clients needs in a timely way, no-show rates for outpatient appointments approach 50 percent. This creates a spiral of appointment shortages and long wait times, and results in patients who don’t arrive for appointments because they have since received treatment somewhere else or do not pursue treatment due to various reasons.
- There is a shortage of behavioral health clinicians, particularly those who are able to prescribe medication such as psychiatrists and psychiatric nurse practitioners. Educational training, recruitment and retention of providers is also a challenge.
- All providers report a lack of coordination of behavioral health care, including coordination of care for frequent, co-morbid, physical conditions. Community and clinical providers are overwhelmed and communication among providers is a challenge.

Faced with this challenging behavioral health landscape, [Southcoast Health](#) sought to forge stronger and more productive links with behavioral health assets in the South Coast region with the ultimate goal of making our behavioral health system work better for patients, providers and our communities.

Research and documentation of behavioral health and community assets

Our Southcoast CHART Phase 1 grant, targets very focused improvements in our regional behavioral health services. Resources made possible with this grant have allowed us to better understand the complexities that are unique to the behavioral health care system here on the South Coast, and to begin to improve this system in a number of ways.

Our project encompassed extensive research to document both assets and gaps in the current behavioral health system, through key informant interviews of over 100 clinical and community partners. This has been augmented with expanded outreach that includes engagement in key behavioral health coalitions in our region and regular convening of community partners and Southcoast behavioral health staff. The result is a robust and comprehensive database and asset map, designed with extensive input from community and clinical partners. This tool will help improve communication among providers, better link our regional behavioral health system, and is expected to facilitate better coordination of care.

The scope of the project includes

- Development of a survey guide with input from Southcoast staff and community partners.
- Key informant interviews with over 100 behavioral health partners including faith based groups and a number of community partners who impact “social determinants of health” such as transportation, housing, education etc.
- Development of a comprehensive, searchable database from over 1000 pages of information on dozens of clinical and community behavioral health assets. The search function was developed to be user-friendly for a wide audience and designed based on input from community partners. In addition, a user guide was also developed to improve operation. The database is housed on a public web site for use by Southcoast staff, other behavioral health providers and consumers and will be updated regularly by Southcoast staff based on input from community partners. The goal is to expand communication, increase access to services, facilitate the referral process and ultimately improve care coordination across the South Coast behavioral health system.
- Completion of a regional, behavioral health gap analysis based on community partner interviews and analysis of Southcoast data.