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Mental Health Association in New Jersey

Calls for Improving Access to Psychiatric Care in New Jersey

The Mental Health Association in New Jersey (MHANJ) is advocating for improving access to psychiatric care for New Jersey residents. The areas earmarked for improvement were identified through a recent research study conducted by the MHANJ.

The MHANJ studied psychiatrist networks in health plan Preferred Provider Organizations (PPOs) in New Jersey. 702 psychiatrists were identified in networks. The following is a brief summary of the findings. Click here for the complete Mental Health Association in New Jersey Network Adequacy Report.

- Of the sample called (S=525), 33% of the listings on line were incorrect.
- When asked if they are accepting new patients (S=321), only 51% said yes.
- When asked how long for an appointment (S=126), 25% answered more than two months; 25% answered one-to-two months.

“Gaining access to psychiatric care in both the private and public sectors is a serious problem in New Jersey. We had reports of people having to wait three-to-six months for an appointment with a psychiatrist. This is not only unacceptable to the individual and family, it can lead to additional strain on the system to treat worsening conditions that have not been addressed on a timely basis,” said Carolyn Beauchamp, President and CEO, MHANJ. Based on these reported concerns, the MHANJ initiated the research study to quantify the problem and develop solid recommendations for improvement.

“Some of our findings can be addressed by providing more accurate communication. For example, 33% of psychiatrists were listed with incorrect contact information on Managed Care Organization websites. This impedes the process of actually reaching a psychiatrist’s office and can lead to frustration and giving up when trying to find a provider. We have shared these and our other results with the Department of Banking and Insurance (DOBI), the agency responsible for managed care network adequacy for some of the plans, as well as other gatekeepers who can help make improvements,” stated Barbara Johnston, the MHANJ’s Director of Advocacy.
The findings have also been shared with the health plans that were included in the study. Wardell Sanders, President, New Jersey Association of Health Plans (NJAHP), stated, “Access to behavioral health care is necessary and important. Findings of inaccuracies concern the health plans and they have undertaken efforts to contact behavioral health providers and correct outdated information. It is also important for network providers to inform health plans when information changes. We appreciate the opportunity to work with MHANJ and we believe these steps will lead to significant improvement in directory accuracy.” If health plan members face challenges, they should call the behavioral health number on their insurance card. They can also reference In-Network Exceptions for Insured Health Benefits Plans.

The study found only 25% of doctors taking new patients could see a patient within two weeks. “People with severe emotional problems, depression or anxiety, struggle against the hopelessness and stigma to seek help,” explained Dr. Linda Gochfeld, a psychiatrist and member of the MHANJ's Public Policy Committee and a collaborator in the study. “It's not easy to make that phone call. If they don't get a positive response after a few tries, they are likely to give up and may continue a downward spiral into hospitalization, disability or even suicide.”

Senator Joseph Vitale (D-19) believes that the findings are representative of all types of insurance coverage. He stated, “We are close to having a crisis in finding a psychiatric appointment in New Jersey regardless of an individual’s insurance plan.”

Assemblywoman Mary Pat Angelini (R-11) commented that, “New Jersey needs to strategically address behavioral health workforce issues by creating an environment where behavioral healthcare providers will want to practice.”

What is Required?

In New Jersey, licensed Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) must maintain adequate network capacity. The HMO regulations require “…a sufficient number of licensed medical specialists available to HMO members to provide medically necessary specialty care. The HMO shall have a policy insuring access to specialists [including psychiatrists] within 45 miles or one hour driving time, whichever is less, of 90 percent of members within each county or approved sub-county service area.” (New Jersey Department of Banking and Insurance, 2006)

This applies to those plans which are not self-funded. When network providers are not available, in-network exception policies exist where plans are required to create a single case agreement with an accessible provider. Members should ask about them if they are having difficulty finding a psychiatrist.

About the MHANJ’s Study: How, When and How Long Does it Take to Get an Appointment with a Psychiatrist in New Jersey?

Consumer input about the needs drove the scope of the study which focused on evaluating accuracy of published information by each Health Management Organization (HMO), the acceptance of new patients by providers and wait times for appointments.

The study encompassed preferred provider organization (PPO) networks across New Jersey including Aetna, AmeriHealth, CIGNA, Coventry, Geisinger, Horizon and Oxford/Liberty.) 702 individual psychiatrists listed on the PPO network websites were identified. A random sample of 525 doctors was used.
Funding for the study was provided through a Novartis grant. Novartis did not participate in conducting the study and is not responsible for the findings or recommendations.

**Next Steps**

“The Mental Health Association in New Jersey has shared the results with policy makers to inform them of the impact of the current difficulties in obtaining mental health services for a significant portion of New Jersey’s population and to request that measures be taken to make improvements,” said Barbara Johnston.

“We have also discussed the results and advocated for change with the health plans and their trade association, NJAHP. We have also informed the authorities accountable for network adequacy including DOBI and the US Department of Labor for self-funded plans as well as the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) and the NJ Behavioral Health Advocacy Community,” stated Carolyn Beauchamp.

The MHANJ will continue our advocacy efforts working with community partners dedicated to improving health care for New Jersey citizens.

**About the Mental Health Association in New Jersey**
The Mental Health Association in New Jersey is a state-wide non-profit organization that strives for mental health for children and adults through advocacy, education, training and services. It is a leader in providing peer services, training and support. The MHANJ’s statewide headquarters is in Verona, with additional offices in Atlantic, Hudson, Ocean and Union Counties. For more information visit mhanj.org or call 973-571-4100.