

Substance abuse, mental health services still going strong

By Todd Forrest
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The novel coronavirus continues to impact every aspect of society, putting additional barriers in the way of much-needed services throughout many communities.

Take health care professionals on the front lines of the opioid crisis and other substance abuse issues, who are now facing new challenges in the ongoing battle to save lives and rebuild families.

Local treatment facilities like New Hope Counseling and MedMark have undergone changes in the wake of the pandemic, but they want to make the public aware that they remain open for business and will lend a hand to those in need.

As if the situation wasn't serious enough, the director of

the National Institute on Drug Abuse expressed concerns recently that the uncertainty and financial hardships surrounding the coronavirus could lead to a nationwide increase in drug and alcohol use.

"Every one of us is affected by COVID – maybe we don't get infected, (but) we're all anxious because of the uncertainties," Institute Director Dr. Nora Volkow told U.S. News and World Report. "How we cope with that anxiety is very much dependent on multiple factors, including our circumstances, but one of the ways that people cope with it is by taking drugs."

Locally, New Hope Counseling has closed its physical offices but continues holding group sessions online. According to Treatment Coordinator Shanna Prather, online intake evaluations should begin

April 15.

In the meantime, other resources are available to those stuck at home with fears of getting left to their own devices.

Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous have moved their meetings online via Zoom, and online group sessions are available 24 hours a day at www.intherooms.com, Prather said.

The Georgia CARES Warm Line features a peer support line that any Peach State resident can call or text if they find themselves in a substance abuse crisis. A specialist is available 365 days a year from 8:30 a.m. until 11 p.m. at 844-326-5400. More information is available at gasubstanceabuse.org.

In addition to these resources, anyone in a mental health crisis can call the Georgia Crisis Line 24 hours a day

at 1-800-715-4225. Further details are obtainable at the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities website at dbhdd.georgia.gov.

Along with New Hope, Blairsville's MedMark Treatment Center is an opiate addiction treatment clinic offering methadone maintenance and counseling services.

At the moment, for reasons beyond its control, MedMark is unable to accept new patients in Blairsville, but director Joy Atkins suggested an alternative MedMark clinic in Murphy, North Carolina.

Atkins also assured the clinic's patients and the community that they will remain open during the mandatory shelter-in-place order, so there's no reason to worry that hundreds of people within Towns and Union counties will suddenly

find themselves thrown into extreme opiate withdrawals.

"I have received emails (from the state informing us) that we are not allowed to close," Atkins said. "Nobody should have any concerns about (MedMark) closing and stopping its services. Besides, that would be evil to do to our patients."

MedMark of Blairsville can be reached at 706-781-6987. The Murphy clinic can be contacted by calling 828-837-5335.

With patients and employees at Blairsville's MedMark center adjusting to counseling sessions by phone and additional safety measures in and around the building, Atkins hailed the resolve of everyone affected.

"This is new territory for all of us, but we're doing all we can to keep everyone safe



and healthy," she said. "We've noticed a few patients that work in the restaurant industry who are struggling a little, but for the most part, everyone is doing well, and we remain confident that we'll get through this."

Meanwhile, Prather advised anyone who is struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues to take advantage of the diverse support network that is currently available.

"Please feel free to reach out to us or any of the resources that are offered," Prather added. "I love being able to get this information out there because people are really going to need it with everything that's happening."

Home health serves patients while watching out for COVID-19

By Jarrett Whitener
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With the spread of the COVID-19 virus, home health care professionals are taking extra precautions to ensure the safety of their clients and caregivers.

"We have completed training on personal protective equipment and our infection control measures," said Account Executive Elena Watts of Encompass Health. "We have to treat everybody as if they have an infection anyways."

"We are well prepared to take care of somebody with any risk they might have, whether that be congestive heart failure or any other medical condition. We are still offering nursing and therapy visits, and we are better able to protect and reduce the risk exposure by patients being able to get care at home."

"That also alleviates the hospitals and volume of people that are going for care. It helps them reserve hospital beds for those that need more specialized care. We are trying to help as many people as we need to."

Other home health companies are taking these same precautions to lower the risk of spreading the virus while caring for folks in need of care but not wanting to stay in hospitals or other facilities.

"Like everyone else, we



are taking the most precaution that everyone can," said Nurse Christa Rick, an administrator at Mountain Home Health Services. "We are continuing to provide services to patients in the home, however, we are honoring the request to postpone visits and things like that."

"We are equipping our clinical staff with the personal protective equipment to ensure that they are protected from any droplets of this virus. We are running into the same supply issues that other health care providers are running into."

"As it stands right now, we have not encountered any patients that have exhibited symptoms or have tested positive for COVID-19. We are prepared to admit those patients to home health if that is appropriate for them."

"For those patients that are worried about the transmission of this, we do call prior to our visits and ask a series of questions about

if the patient may be exhibiting any symptoms to make sure that we keep everyone safe."

Other businesses, such as Happy Heart Home Care, provide other home services that help people get the medication they need or their groceries without having to worry about a trip to the store.

Each of these businesses is preparing employees with the equipment to prevent fluid exchange and limit the risk for employees that are working to care for others.

"I'm an RN, and we just help family members take care of usually their parents that may need assistance," said Terri Worthy with Happy Heart. "We take precautions and use PPE, and luckily, I had a pretty good supply before all this happened."

"Basically, we just help our senior citizens with what we can, and sometimes, that is just companion care – they don't have anybody to be with them or help them around the house."

"If they are afraid to go out to the store, then we will go out for them. We will go out and get their medication if they need us to or anything like that to help them out. We usually take them to the store, but because of the situation, we will just go for them and bring the groceries back."

People in need of these services can contact Happy Heart Home Care at 706-781-0906.

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help businesses meet financial obligations and operating expenses that could have been met had the disaster not occurred. Specifically, the loan is for paying fixed debts, payroll, accounts payable and other bills during the pandemic.

The financial implications of COVID-19 determine eligibility for Economic Injury Disaster Loans, and applicants may apply online at disasterloan.sba.gov/ela.

Another source of assistance is the Paycheck Protection Program, which is a substantially larger program.

The Paycheck Protection Program is a loan designed to provide a direct incentive for small businesses to keep their workers on the payroll," according to the Small Business Administration. "SBA will forgive loans if all employees are kept on the payroll for eight weeks and the money is used for payroll, rent, mortgage interest, or utilities."

However, the following information is needed to apply: average monthly payroll costs over the last 12 months, including salaries, wages, commissions, tips, vacation, sick and medical

leave paid, group health care benefits, insurance premiums, retirement benefits, mortgage payments, lease or rent and utilities.

South State Bank and United Community Bank will both be working with the Paycheck Protection Program. United Community has a link at www.ucbi.com/support/covid-19-updates with additional information. South State requests all inquiries go through the local customer care center.

One industry that's been particularly affected by the coronavirus outbreak is hair care. Berrong's Barber Shop owner Kris Berrong, however, had the foresight to suspend business one week before the regulations closing his business were put in place.

"Everybody kind of saw that something was about to happen," Berrong said. "So, my wife and I spoke about it, and we decided to close up shop before everyone was forced to shut down."

"I didn't want to be part of the problem. I see many people during the day, and I didn't want to give it to my customers or have someone give it to me."

With business booming at the time, Berrong knew

he would take a hit, but considering that he is the only employee, the decision became a little easier to make.

"I have the best clientele in the world," he said. "I've had them call me, not for haircuts, but just to check in on my family and me. They are the best – I hate this so much for them."

Berrong has reassured his loyal customers that the closure is simply a speed bump and that he will return to cutting hair as soon as possible. In the meantime, he urges the community to stay indoors and follow the protocols set forth by the commissioner and the governor.

"I want them to know that I miss them and I'm sorry that I had to close," he said. "They are not only my customers but my friends. I wish them all the best and want them to stay safe and healthy."

"As for everyone else in general, I know this is a trying time, but I hope and pray everyone does the right thing. Let's remain at home and not gather so we can knock this thing out and get back to work."

"Then, we can get back at it, shop locally and help these small businesses get back on their feet."