

Mental health providers connecting with homeless by meeting people where they are

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Accessing mental health and substance use resources is now more streamlined for Bremerton's most vulnerable, with Kitsap Mental Health Services now offering services at downtown's Salvation Army during the day. For the past six weeks, providers at the facility on Sixth Street, which provides a winter shelter and daytime resources like meals, are slowly reaching individuals that might have never walked in KMHS's doors to get help.

In that time, Kitsap Mental Health Services' Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team members have reached more than 60 individuals who have been either enrolled in services or reconnected with their adult outpatient (AOP) clinician, said Amanda Williford, special programs clinical manager. One ACT team member is present at a time at the Salvation Army during KMHS staffing hours, right now about two hours a day, five days a week.

KMHS recently earned the federal designation as a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic. In tandem with the achievement the team began reassessing the behavioral health needs of their community and identifying gaps in service, said CEO Monica Bernhard. After seeing [homeless encampments](#) grow on city streets over the summer, particularly on MLK Way, which the Salvation Army's rear entrance faces, KMHS decided to extend its program outward.

"Of course, anybody down there could have always accessed our services, but you've got this concentrated group of individuals that were living down there and we have to look at ourselves and say 'What is our role here?'" Bernhard said. "So instead of waiting for people to come to our services, let's take some of our folks and try to engage them right where they are."

The obstacles in accessing services

The experiences and circumstances of unhoused people can vary greatly from one individual to the next. Someone may slip into homelessness because of their economic circumstances and the next may suffer chronic homelessness because of untreated mental illness or substance use disorder, Bernhard said. And while many individuals may be able to reach out and proactively connect with services, traveling to an office and navigating the system may not be realistic for many others.

KMHS specializes in supporting and assisting individuals on the moderate and severe end of the mental illness and substance use disorder spectrum, such as those with schizophrenia or post traumatic stress disorder, Bernhard said. But while the service providers pursue wrap-around services to empower these people through their recovery process, such "illnesses may be entrenched for years or decades."

Mental health services are voluntary, so unless an extremely narrow set of circumstances are met, no one can be compelled to enroll in services, Bernhard said. People can – and do – decline services, even if they are in a situation where they are out on the street talking to internal stimuli.

“One of the biggest challenges that we're having in that situation is it takes time to build trust with the individuals,” Bernhard said. “Many people have been in mental health services in the past, maybe didn't have a good experience, maybe had side effects of medications, but there's a lot of reasons why they may not want to jump into those services.”

Among those reasons, people may not travel to KMHS' facilities across Kitsap County due to a lack of transportation, lack of resources like a cell phone or calendar, or negative experiences with service providers in the past, Bernhard said.

“We have quite a few people that are regulars here that have really severe mental health,” said Eric Harrold of Salvation Army. “That person that's chasing that fantasy thing, having a psychosis, they're not going to pick up the phone all of a sudden in clarity and call an ombudsperson for help. If the ombudsperson isn't willing to push away from their desk and come down here, they're going to be no help to me or this person.”

Harrold hopes that with KMHS' new presence at the Salvation Army, people who've been on the fence about enrolling in services will finally be able to make a quick connection.

“The hardest to serve people are not only hardest to serve because of whatever they're going through,” Harrold said, “They have the least amount of opportunity for service because they don't fit the model that a lot of organizations require people to operate in, in order to get services.”

Meeting people where they are

By placing KMHS team members on the ground where some of the county's most in-need individuals are, the agency hopes its staff can build relationships that will ultimately empower people to choose a recovery path for themselves.

Guests in the Salvation Army are not often inclined to reach out to service providers even if they have an office in the building, Harrold said, so he's encouraged KMHS staff to mingle in the guests' spaces during the day.

“We're still in that engagement phase and just trying to establish rapport and figure out what works,” Williford said.

Right now, KMHS staff wear their identifying badges and walk around the property, sit down to watch TV with guests and chat with them. If the guests bring up KMHS or services, or the KMHS team member makes mention, that can be a segue towards a deeper conversation, but for now, the staff is just there as a show of support.

“When we first got there, a lot of folks were suspicious about ‘Who are these people?’... and we were almost avoided by most of the community there,” Williford said. “The more consistently we’ve been showing up with friendly faces...and meeting people exactly where they’re at, when they’re ready, we’ve noticed that it’s more welcoming.”

Williford believes a sense of hope is improving in the community.

“Because it’s community based work, I think it makes more of an impact for our folks more rapidly,” Williford said. “It creates relationships and it helps individuals see that they’re a full person and we want to treat the full person.”

The pathway to services

Interested individuals can access KMHS peer counselors with lived experience in mental health and substance use disorder without the expectation of enrollment in services, Bernhard said. If someone becomes interested in services at the shelter, KMHS has a sign in list for interested guests, Williford said. KMHS can then offer transportation to their main office for an intake session, through their partnerships with Gather Together Grow Together and Kitsap Transit. KMHS team members can also help clients connect with their current AOP clinicians and can support them with their release of information.

The KMHS ACT team members specialize in psychosis, but certain team members can also serve clients with substance and trauma-based histories, anxiety and depression. Should they need it, these team members can connect clients with mental health providers, peer counselors, case managers, daily meetings and can make sure clients get their needed medication. On Tuesdays Wednesdays and Thursdays at the shelter, KMHS can help clients connect with specialized supervisors that can fit clients’ needs for a male, female, or substance use focused care.

Connecting with the ACT team can be easier and quicker with the KMHS staff now in the Salvation Army office space they share with Peninsula Community Health Services, Bernhard said.

Even further down the line, KMHS can help clients find housing, through partnership with the Bremerton Housing Authority, and employment when they are ready, Williford said. KMHS hopes to find housing and employment for guests at the Salvation Army before the shelter closes on May 1, which could free up beds at whatever shelter option comes to take its place.

“People that are in the shelter, many of them are some of the most vulnerable people and they’re much more likely, in many cases, to be taken advantage of because of their untreated mental illness,” Bernhard said. “So what we’re trying to do is help people, ultimately, get into services and part of that healing is helping them with housing.”

Of the five dozen individuals that KMHS has been able to reach in the six weeks since they initiated their presence at the Salvation Army, at least six who have initiated services hadn’t received mental health or substance use services with KMHS in the past.

In the meantime, KMHS is speaking with case managers and care coordinators with Peninsula Community Health Services, which has been working within the Salvation Army to provide their services for about a year, to see what strategies worked best for them to build meaningful and trusting relationships with the shelter's guests, Williford said.

"As long as it appears that there's a need down there we don't have any plans to pull out," Bernhard said. "This is not just as long as the encampments are an issue – as long as there's a need. Right now, our agency is committed to supporting and bringing our services."