

ROUNDTABLE MENTAL HEALTH

During Business First's Roundtable discussion on Mental Health, eight Buffalo executives offer advice to employers on how to help their staff. Here is a report from the discussion which was held on Thursday, April 15, 2021.

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MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS OFFER ADVICE TO EMPLOYERS TO HELP STAFF

Managing the pandemic and anticipating what comes next has been a significant undertaking for organizations whose job it is to address mental health issues not only in the community but among their employees.

Their approaches can help employers in other industries address mental health concerns that likely are affecting their own staffs.

"The biggest challenge is trying to define what the new norm will be," said Kelly Dumas, chief strategic initiatives officer at BestSelf

Behavioral Health. "How do we consistently meet the needs of the community and also take care of our staff, because they also are experiencing this new world and trying to balance everything that comes along with it. We were all thrown into this new way of working and providing services."

Self-care is a focus at Endeavor Health Services, CEO Elizabeth Mauro said.

"In the community that we're serving, the level of pressure and anxiety is enormous. There's just a concentrated, concerted effort on



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ANNE COSTANTINO
President and CEO
Horizon Health Services

Anne was appointed to her current position as President and Chief Executive Officer for the Horizon Corporations in 1994. In this role she leads the development and implementation of strategic and annual operating plans for Horizon Health Services, Horizon Village and the Health Management Group. During her tenure, Anne has led the

organization in expansion of services in WNY. Revenues and market share have grown through expansion and implementation of best practices. Horizon staff has grown to more than 700 clinical and administrative members through this development period. Anne is also the founding member and current President of Value Network, IPA, a membership organization of WNY behavioral and health care providers working on transformation of the health care system to improve patient outcomes and decrease costs. An undergraduate of Buffalo State College and a graduate of SUNY at Buffalo, where she received her M.S. in Educational Psychology and Rehabilitation Counseling, Anne is an active member of several industry organizations and Boards.



DR. SANJAY GUPTA
Chief Medical Officer
BryLin Behavioral Health System

Sanjay Gupta, MD, a board certified adult and geriatric psychiatrist, is the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for BryLin Behavioral Health System. He has a wide range of expertise with 20 plus years in clinical practice ranging from running a large group practice with eight psychiatrists, running multiple hospital inpatient units and clinics, and having a solo

practice. Dr. Gupta's current practice includes consulting with several other behavioral health organizations and is an attending psychiatrist at several long-term care facilities throughout WNY. Dr. Gupta has written over 100 publications for peer-reviewed journals, has provided consultation for design of research studies and feasibility of such studies and serves as a reviewer for major journals in the field such as the American Journal of Psychiatry and American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry. Dr. Gupta has also provided mentorship to several students and junior faculty. He currently has appointments in the Departments' of Psychiatry as a Clinical Professor at Jacobs School of Medicine as well as SUNY Upstate Medical University at Syracuse, NY.



MICHAEL R. CUMMINGS
MD Associate Medical Director
Erie County Medical Center

Dr. Michael Cummings has over 15 years of experience treating children, adolescents, and adults for all major psychiatric conditions and developmental challenges in a wide array of community and institutional settings. He currently serves as Vice Chair of Community Affairs

and Outreach for the Department of Psychiatry of the University at Buffalo, Associate Medical Director of Erie County Medical Center, Medical Director of NYSTART (Regions 1 and 4), and Medical Director of Our Lady of Victory's Intensive Treatment Program. In addition to his clinical and administrative work, his major focus is on developing and integrating systems of care for individuals with mental illness and developmental disabilities who are at high risk of avoidable hospitalization or incarceration.



CINDY LEE
CEO
OLV Human Services

Cindy Lee is the CEO of OLV Human Services – one of the largest human service agencies in Western New York. OLV Human Services is the legacy human service organization of Father Nelson Baker, which today provides programs and services to more than 4,500 individ-

uals facing emotional, behavioral, and mental challenges. Cindy is a widely accomplished, creative, and self-directed organizational leader with a compelling blend of broad experiences. She has extensive experience with executive level management, building-based administration, special education administration, human resource functions, labor relations, professional development, and advocacy.



KELLY DUMAS, LCSW
Chief Strategic Initiatives Officer
BestSelf Behavioral Health, Inc.

Kelly Dumas, LCSW, is Chief Strategic Initiatives Officer at BestSelf Behavioral Health. Kelly joined BestSelf Behavioral Health, previously Lake Shore, in 2012. Kelly provides oversight and leadership to 30+ programs and services at BestSelf. These include Substance Use Disorder Treatment Programs including mobile clinic services, family treatment court services, Recovery

Community and intensive residential services for pregnant/parenting women. She also oversees Homeless Outreach and Supportive Housing Programs serving individuals and families with mental health and substance use disorders. Kelly is a graduate of Oishei Leaders of Color and Health Foundation for Western & Central NY - Health Leadership Fellow. She is a member of Steering Committee for the Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Providers of NYS. Kelly was recognized by the Buffalo Chapter of the Association of Black Social Workers in 2017. Kelly earned a Master of Social Work from SUNY Buffalo where she still serves as an adjunct professor.



ELIZABETH L. MAURO
LCSW-R Chief Executive Officer
Endeavor Health Services

Ms. Elizabeth L. Mauro, LCSW-R was appointed CEO of Endeavor Health Services in 2007. Since her appointment, Ms. Mauro has led the growth and expansion of the organization from Erie County into Niagara, Orleans, Genesee and Monroe Counties. Most recent accomplishments include implementation of a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC), becoming a founding

partner of the region's first Behavioral Health Care Collaborative IPA, implementing integrated clinics with primary care including Medication Assisted Treatment for adolescents and young adults, and changing the brand of the agency to better reflect the service expansion and evolving role of behavioral health. Endeavor currently operates 35 different programs and is licensed in Adult Mental Health, Child Mental Health, Alcohol and Substance Use, and Integrated Services. Ms. Mauro is a graduate of SUNY at Buffalo's Graduate Program in Social Work, and is a recipient of the 2018 Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Association of Social Workers. She serves on the Board of Directors of People, Inc., and the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York.



LORNA FITZPATRICK
MD Vice President Medical Affairs
Univera Healthcare

Lorna Fitzpatrick, MD, is Univera Healthcare Vice President Medical Affairs. She is board certified in pediatric oncology, and prior to joining Univera, spent nearly 20 years in clinical practice specializing in treating children with brain tumors. Dr. Fitzpatrick's passion and expertise in caring for children with com-

plex medical and developmental needs led her to develop a nationally accredited, comprehensive care model and program for patients with Neurofibromatosis. Univera Healthcare is a nonprofit health plan that serves members across the eight counties of Western New York. It is part of a Rochester-based health plan with 1.5 million members across 39 counties of Upstate New York. Learn more about Univera at www.Univera-healthcare.com.



CINDY VOELKER
Associate CEO
Spectrum Health & Human Services

As a graduate of the University of Buffalo, and Buffalo General School of Nursing, I joined Spectrum Health & Human Services in 1985 and have held many different positions over my long, satisfying career. I have been part of the Executive team since 2010 and the

Associate CEO for the last 3 years. My passion and reason for my long tenure at Spectrum Health is our mission to partner with individuals, families, and communities to help achieve a better quality of life. There have been many highlights during my career, the establishment of Health Homes, CCBHC services, expanded community based services and most recently, the first regional urgent mental health and addiction care clinic at Spectrum Health's 1280 Main St. location, My goal is to continue to lead Spectrum Health to be an exemplary provider of quality and compassionate care while providing the same exemplary experience for our staff.



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what we deliberately need to do to take care of ourselves," Mauro said.

"We very literally say, 'You have to take care of yourself in order to take care of others.' If they're burned out and crispy, they're not going to be as effective as possible. We start each meeting with 'How are you doing?' "



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Working with patients while practicing pandemic protocols, meeting with colleagues from a laptop on the dining room table, helping children with homework in the next room and watching housework go undone skews work-life balance. It's been more difficult than everyone imagined, Dr. Lorna Fitzpatrick, Univera Healthcare's vice president medical affairs, said.

Mental health care providers often dismiss their own needs while caring for other clients, said Horizon Health Services CEO Anne Constantino.

"They think, 'I can handle this. I've got the skills. I know what to do,'" Constantino said. "That is true but you're not a robot."

Psychiatrist Dr. Michael Cummings, associate medical director at Erie County Medical Center, said stress is heightened

when change is a daily occurrence. At ECMC, a patient unit may become a quarantine unit without much warning, and suddenly medical/surgical nurses have psychiatric patients under their care.

These professionals have been asked every day to practice in areas that were out of their scopes of expertise, he said.

"That uncertainty of what your day is going to be has been a struggle," Cummings said.

"So trying to support staff doing things that are well out of their typical job description has been one of our largest issues."

Burn out leads to absenteeism, leaving fewer to pick up the workload, panelists said. The situation has created a general sense of fatigue, said Dr. Sanjay Gupta, chief medical officer of the BryLin Behavioral Health System.

"Everyone is a little on edge," Gupta said. "They're not relaxed. You see a lot of that. They're nervous, wondering what's going to happen next. In general, there is just this unrest. Everybody's just not in a good place."

Cindy Lee, CEO of OLV Human Services, said the staff are exhausted. And while it is encouraging to think of the imminent end of the pandemic, she said, the effects will linger, making the transition out of life during Covid-19 long and uncertain.

"It's hard to think an hour ahead of time," she said. "You just have to manage what is and be ready for what's next."

Coping strategies have been helping in the meantime. Mauro said her staff at

each of the Endeavor sites have brought their individual talents to the fore and via Zoom hosted cooking demonstrations from their kitchens, relaxation techniques and exercise plans, for example. They also came up with treasure hunts, where teams competed by collecting various things related to the agency, such as photos of

something containing the word endeavor.

Winners won a small token, such as a gym bag, but the benefit was the camaraderie, if remote, she said.

"It brought people together in a fun way because we were missing that connection with each other," Mauro said. "We were missing our agency picnic and our celebrations and our events, so we created new ones."

BestSelf offered the staff as well as the public restorative healing circles that encourage connection and communication for participants in a safe and peaceful environment. The



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- Michael R. Cummings, MD Associate Medical Director, Erie County Medical Center

initiative addressed stresses related to the pandemic and the civil unrest of the past year, and they were held evenings and weekends to encourage accessibility, Dumas said.

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At Horizon Health Services, a new focus on supervision helped staff cope with the stress of the pandemic, Constantino said. What once was all business, the encounters have begun instead with “How are you doing?” and being flexible with what the staff needed and accommodating those needs, she said.



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Such initiatives that recognize the importance of good mental health of the caregiver help staff be able to best address their patients’ needs, the panelists said.

That type of approach has been developed and used by Cummings’ team that works with parents with children with autism, who have had their own challenges during the isolation of the pandemic.

“What we focus on as the first step now is asking, ‘Mom, what are you doing for yourself? What are you doing to take care of yourself?’ ” Cummings said. “It used to be the last thing we’d ask, now it is almost the first conversation in almost every single consult. That will be, at least in my practice, something that will continue.”

Doctors, too, need to recognize and address their own vulnerabilities heightened by the pandemic. That’s one tough task, because doctors don’t think about themselves, they think about others. The prevailing attitude toward doctors is they are not allowed to show weakness, the panelists agreed.

To that end, ECMC has reinvigorated the physician wellness committee, said Cummings, who serves as the medical staff president at the medical center.

“It really is trying to support doctors,” Cummings said. “It turns out that we are really bad at supporting ourselves. Even considering that you need help, particularly as a physician, is a hard thing to do. So, we are trying to reach out to staff on all levels, and nursing staff too, to be proactive about that rather than wait for the point where they ask for help, because they probably needed help for a very long time before they’ve stepped up and said something.”

The demand for mental health and behavioral health services has increased exponentially, giving the organizations additional pressures to meet the costs of care.

Despite assumptions that remote care is less expensive, the savings are not there, the panelists said. In addition to the caregivers, the organizations must have a team to address technology issues and maintain an office and, in some cases, multiple physical locations. However, the care they provide improves medical costs, Constantino said.

“We know that when we help somebody with behavioral health, with mental health, with substance abuse, their medical costs will go down,” she said. “The better job we do, the more ability we have to do it, the more resources we have to do it, the better everyone wins. Society wins, families win, payors win, employers win.”

Panelist said they have told employees shouldering an extra workload to back off a bit and gave them the OK to take a mental-health day off.

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- Cindy Lee, CEO, OLV Human Services

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This type of sensitivity toward workers can and should translate to other industries.

Warning signs of employee distress, Mauro said, include late arrival to meetings, never putting on the device's camera, a short attention span, and telltale body language, even getting flustered when homelife interrupts a Zoom meeting. Dumas added a change in work patterns or performance, inability to complete tasks and fatigue. These should trigger some action by any employer, Dumas said.

Here's what the panelists suggest:

- The first step is the employer needs to recognize there is a problem or a potential problem, said Cindy Voelker, associate CEO, Spectrum Health and Human Services..
- "I think you have to tell them 'This is what we're going to do.' Don't ask them what they need or want, and don't wait for them to tell you, because they don't know," Voelker said. "You have to be more proactive. Do something for them rather than expecting them to act on

their own or tell you what they need."

- Set up boundaries around work activities, so the line between work life and homelife doesn't get blurred, Mauro suggested.
- At Endeavor, if an employee is off from work, the rules are: no responding to emails and no joining in Zoom meetings. Employees also are highly encouraged to create workspace at home that does not infringe on personal space. "Leadership needs to model those boundaries for themselves," Dr. Fitzpatrick added.
- Be supportive and make efforts to reach out to workers. Don't think money is the answer, Dr. Gupta said.
- "I don't think an extra check is going to cut this," he said. "All of this working from home is making people feel




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- anxiety, depression and monitor substance abuse and the Calm app to address sleep, meditation, and relaxation.
- Practice mindfulness with employees. It has been effective for staff at OLV Human Services, where a Zoom session on mindfulness is scheduled every other week during the lunch hour, Lee said. It has made a big difference with the staff and the effects have trickled down to clients.
- "Even a half hour of just having a minute to breath and acknowledge that this is a lot seems to reenergize people and gets them back on track," Lee said.
- Give the employees the flexibility to set their own personal plan for self-care, Constantino said.

"In the community that we're serving, the level of pressure and anxiety is enormous. There's just a concentrated, concerted effort on what we deliberately need to do to take care of ourselves."

- Elizabeth L. Mauro, LCSW-R Chief Executive Officer, Endeavor Health Services

- disconnected. Help support them to feel connected."
- Suggest employees get phone apps that can address some mental health issues. The panelists mentioned The COPE Wellness app, to help improve sleep,

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"You have to be more proactive. Do something for them rather than expecting them to act on their own or tell you what they need."

- Cindy Voelker, Associate CEO, Spectrum Health & Human Services

"You're not resentful when you have control over making decisions on what's going to help your life," she said. "You're resentful for increased stress when the box is set and have to perform that way."

- Take a meeting for a walk outside, so staff can get some fresh air and exercise. It's been a popular practice at Univera, Dr. Fitzpatrick said.
- Establish a no-meeting day, Dr. Fitzpatrick added. "Just to have those days where you're not on Zoom all day long," she said, "when you're allowed to sit down and think and be creative about what you're doing and do your work. Have a little bit of a breather from meeting. That has been

life-changing."

- Start meetings on time but end them 15 minutes early as a gesture toward giving the staff time back into their schedules, so they can stand up, stretch, turn off their cameras, take a break, Constantino said.
- Approach staff with empathy, Constantino added. "What we know to be true about how difficult things can be, use empathy to try to allow people to give words to what they are experiencing."

One exercise toward that end is a thorn-bud-rose exercise leadership conducted with OLV Human Services staff, Lee said. Each staff member during a meeting were asked to tell the group a thorn, or something on their mind, a bud, or something they are looking forward to and a rose, something that makes them proud. Two

staff members dissolved into tears in the process. "I felt very proud that they felt comfortable enough to really show that," Lee said.



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- Lorna Fitzpatrick, MD Vice President Medical Affairs, Univera Healthcare



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• Consider eliminating some meetings altogether, though it might sound antithetical to today's workplace.

Covid-19 helped clarify what is important and what is necessary in the course of the workday, Cummings said. Incessant meetings aren't among them, and some just stopped happening at ECMC during the height of the pandemic.

"The reality is, there are some we had to reintroduce in different ways and there were many where we thought, 'Why were we spending 2 ½ hours every Thursday doing that?' Seems we've done these committees because these committees exist. They've always been there," he said.

Whatever the new norm will be, he said, it likely will be free of the excess baggage attached to certain aspects of the job.

And it won't be a wholesale return to what was left behind, Constantino said.

"There's a real loss to that," Constantino said. "It's exciting to think about the possibilities of what could be.

But it doesn't change the fact that it's unsettled, and you don't know where you'll fit in or how you're going to live. The fun stuff you loved about your life before maybe aren't going to come back the same way."

"Everyone is a little on edge," Gupta said. "They're not relaxed. You see a lot of that. They're nervous, wondering what's going to happen next. In general, there is just this unrest. Everybody's just not in a good place."

- Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Chief Medical Officer, BryLin Behavioral Health System



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Over 40% of adults reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition during the pandemic, including: anxiety, depression, substance use, or having thoughts of suicide.

"Mental health is just as, if not more, important as physical health." - Sanjay Gupta, M.D.

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