Telepsychiatry Combines Psychiatry with Technology to Improve Patient Access to Care

COMMUNITY MATTERS
By Allison Linville

When Joe Goffena, licensed clinical social worker at North Valley Behavioral Health, returned to Montana over five years ago, he studied the statistics showing high rates of depression and suicide in the state and he hoped to someday see mental health services and resources be available to a wider area. The technology is now available locally to make this idea a reality. Goffena is happy to be a part of the answer to the problem of accessibility which is telepsychiatry, a new program at North Valley Behavioral Health.

Dr. J. Douglas Muir of North Valley Behavioral Health explains, "A physical presence, though ideal, is not necessary for us to connect with our patients. That's what makes telepsychiatry perfect for expanding mental health resources – the need is often greater in rural areas, and we can reach these communities digitally now, to connect with those who really need mental and behavioral health support."

The telepsychiatry grant is in response to an extreme and apparent need for additional resources in the community. "Access to care is one of the reasons that mountain states have high instances of depression, suicide and other mental health issues," Dr. Muir says. "There is potential to expand this program to many other areas of Montana, which is a great opportunity, because the providers are also residents of the state and understand specific cultural concerns and struggles that might be unique to a certain area."

Joe Goffena, who recently came to NVBH from the North Valley Embrace Health program, will be using telepsychiatry to connect with older adults in the Eureka area. "I like to normalize mental health for older adults, and make it easier and more comfortable to talk about aging, life transitions, grief, depression, loneliness, and other common struggles that we face later in life," says Goffena. He is passionate about allowing this population to talk through these difficulties, and recognize that they won't receive negative judgements or reactions.

The greatest mental health needs in the community were identified to Dr. Muir when he arrived a few years ago to start the Behavioral Health program at North Valley Hospital. Now, many specific needs described to Dr. Muir are being addressed by several therapists with different areas of focus; Michael Edwards, LCPC, LAC focusing on..."