Population Grows, Pool of Psychiatrists Doesn't

It's no secret there is a national shortage of psychiatrists and many facilities struggle to maintain a full staff to accommodate their patient census. In some communities the recruiting effort is more of a constant for good reason: population growth. This is the challenge for Southern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services in Las Vegas, Nevada, one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States. To decrease extensively long wait times for patients in the inpatient, outpatient and acute care settings, the facility utilizes locum tenens providers. By doing so SNAMHS is able to maintain its high standard of care.

Situation

Southern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services, Las Vegas, Nevada is a non-profit mental health care center that provides both inpatient and outpatient services. SNAMHS has 790 employees and is comprised of an inpatient hospital, a psychiatric observation unit, and four mental health clinics. Because of the continual rise in population in the Las Vegas area and a growing national shortage of psychiatrists, recruiting for psychiatrists has been an ongoing effort for the agency for more than 10 years. Therefore, SNAMHS has a history of utilizing locum tenens providers.

Challenge

A few years ago SNAMHS was close to being fully staffed. However, the community continued to grow, and in doing so, Southern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services needed to as well. SNAMHS Contracts Manager Karen McKay explains that in July and October of 2005 there were 26 psychiatrist positions and more than 100 beds added to the facility. With psychiatrists in short supply, the lengthy medical licensing process hampered recruiting efforts for locum tenens providers, as well. Locum tenens psychiatrists were not being placed at SNAMHS as frequently as necessary to meet the vacancy needs.

As McKay explains, the shortage in coverage threatened the agency's ability to maintain the community standard of care and its Joint Commission accreditation, always concerns for medical facilities. Severe and continual staff shortages mean longer waiting times for patients to be seen in outpatient acute care settings or to be assigned inpatient beds.

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McKay explains, “Ideally in the outpatient setting a patient would be seen monthly by the doctor. In order to see all of the patients on our census, they are scheduled to see a doctor every other month, and the nurse the opposite month. If the patient load is excessive and appointments are booked up, the regular schedule may be stretched to five or six weeks for the nurse, then an additional five or six weeks for the doctor. In the inpatient setting a shortage of psychiatrists can cause discharge delays which result in increased wait times for inpatient beds and more patients waiting in community emergency rooms. Mentally ill patients waiting in community emergency rooms place additional burdens on an already stretched system.” Ultimately, the inability to adequately staff beds could have resulted in closing the hospital.

To manage the conditions, permanent medical staff was often called upon to fill in at locations other than their regular work assignments. Shifting work assignments creates stress to the physicians, puts a burden on support staff for rescheduling patients and, most important, impacts continuity of care for the patients.

Solution

As a means of tapping into a large pool of Nevada-licensed psychiatrists, SNAMHS began working with locumTenens.com. McKay recalls, “LocumTenens.com has provided three excellent Nevada licensed psychiatrists in the past fiscal year, and has provided consistently reliable service by their scheduling staff. Two of the doctors continue temporary assignments in the current fiscal year. Both are heartily welcomed back, or requested. Each psychiatrist assigned to SNAMHS has been properly licensed and credentialed, with no difficulties encountered during SNAMHS in-house credentialing and privileging process.” The providers have also become integrated into staff and participate in clinical meetings and provide input into system and clinical improvements.

Results

Through use of locum tenens psychiatrists SNAMHS is able to eliminate the need to move permanent psychiatrists to different work assignments. The providers helped stabilize operations by reducing the waiting time between regular appointments with psychiatrists, and kept hospital beds open. “Locum Tenens.com has proven to be one of the most reliable when it comes to providing qualified psychiatrists, accurate licensing status information, accurate scheduling information, and excellent communication measures with our staff.”