

UW-Madison: New program to expand access to substance abuse treatment in rural WI

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MADISON, Wis. – A new statewide collaboration between the Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA) and the UW School of Medicine and Public Health aims to bring much needed help to rural communities grappling with a rise in substance use and addiction.

The new program, named Wisconsin Rural Health & Substance Use Clinical Support (RHeSUS) is designed to improve care for patients in rural hospitals and clinics who need help managing substance use disorders. It kicked off this month by initiating training for health care workers in rural counties in how to recognize and provide care for people showing signs of unhealthy substance use, according to Dr. Randall Brown, professor of family medicine and community health, UW School of Medicine and Public Health, and an addiction medicine specialist.

“Rates of alcohol, opioid and other drug use were already increasing in Wisconsin prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but have only surged additionally during the pandemic,” he said. “The need is as great as it’s ever been for substance use disorder services, especially in rural areas.”

The program is funded by a \$1 million community action grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program, and as it continues to roll out, on-call support will be available to rural health care workers who need immediate support in how best to support addiction recovery of their patients.

The RHeSUS program involves teamwork between the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health,

Wisconsin Hospital Association and Wisconsin Voices for Recovery to assist rural hospitals and clinics across the state.

“In many places, health care workers don’t have familiarity with addressing these patients’ needs, but by being able to recognize and meet their needs before their conditions worsen, we can prevent unnecessary suffering and deaths,” Brown said.

The WHA serves as the community organization with Nadine Allen, chief quality officer, as the program champion, Jill Lindwall, clinical quality improvement manager, fulfilling the program director role and Brown serving as the academic partner for the program along with members of his team Cindy Burzinski, director, Wisconsin Voices for Recovery (WiVFR), and Dr. Alison Miller, assistant clinical professor of family medicine and community health, and principal investigator for WiVFR, who are leading this effort across the state.

Through Wisconsin Voices for Recovery, a statewide recovery advocacy program that is operated by personnel in the UW–Madison Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, RHeSUS will also leverage and expand a network called [ED2Recovery+](#) which serves as an emergency department peer recovery coaching program.

ED2Recovery+ network coaches provide training and support for emergency room staff to care for people admitted for substance-related issues.

The Wisconsin Hospital Association will aid in connecting Brown, Burzinski and their teams with rural hospitals and clinics in Wisconsin.

“We are so fortunate to be working with such a strong academic partner and collaborators that truly are bringing forward expert resources to assist our rural communities.” Allen said. “Substance use disorder is certainly a high priority for our members.”

By leveraging the capabilities of these three organizations, RHeSUS aims to increase patient access to substance abuse treatment in the state, Brown said.

“It won’t happen overnight, but even initially we can make a difference through our partnerships by training doctors, nurses and others to care for people in rural areas,” he said. “Without this collaborative approach, this wouldn’t be possible.”

Brown will be available for interviews today, and a recorded interview with him is



available.