

Mental Health Planning Council – Virtual Meetings held during Pandemic

Mental health advocates from across the state - including many from regional and local CSP committees - met virtually this week with top state health officials where they heard updates on the COVID-19 vaccine distribution and learned that Norristown State Hospital (NSH) will be the first state hospital to receive the vaccine.

“All state hospitals are in the first phase, so it’s a matter of supply,” said Kristen Houser, Deputy Secretary of Mental Health for the state’s Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS).

During the Mental Health Planning Council (MHPC) Joint Session, Dr. Dale Adair, Medical Director for OMHSAS, said NSH was scheduled to receive its shipment on December 17th with Wernersville State Hospital in Berks County, being next in line. Both patients and hospital workers will receive the vaccine if they choose. There is no mandate to get the vaccine. Adair said the priority order for hospitals to receive the vaccines was based on the number of patients and staff who have had the virus at each facility. Adair said by end of the year or in early January, all of the state hospitals should have received the vaccine.

Theresa Miller, Secretary of the Department of Human Services (DHS), shared work she has doing on racial inequity - how past discussions of diversity did not make the progress needed to overcome racism. She acknowledged that raising the issue of racial inequity was an uncomfortable topic for many, one that has been challenging and has not made her popular.

“If we don’t talk about it, if we don’t focus on it, we aren’t going to make any progress on it,” Miller said. “It’s the most challenging thing I’ve done. People are really uncomfortable talking about race.”

Miller, who is white, said it was a challenge for her to bring up the subject, saying she was taught growing up not to see color; so her family didn’t talk about race - it was taboo.

Miller began her quest by reaching out to staff of color within the DHS departments to start a conversation and address racial equity issues at their own level. This included issues in the workplace and the community at large. They held a Steering Committee as well. Miller gave many statistics about African American percentages of people using services from SNAP to Juvenile Justice, foster care and more. One example she highlighted was in day care where African American children’s care isn’t as high quality statistically as their white counterparts. Miller’s department has already begun to address the disparity by giving more funds to those day care centers.

Some people on the call asked Miller if she could pass along information to providers as she has asked providers to have these conversations with their staff as well. Miller said one big issue to focus on is: what is keeping people of color from moving into higher positions in an organization (as happens in hers). Others asked if there was or could be a blueprint to follow. One African American woman on the call said she had been in the military for 20 years and they had blueprints for how to do things.

Kathie Mitchell and Ellen Kozlowski contributed to this story.

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