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Orange County Releases Mental Health Study Results, Call to Action in Collaboration with Heart of Florida United Way

Study Focuses on Solutions to Assist those Suffering from Mental Illnesses

ORLANDO, Fla. (February 22, 2022) – The results of the Orange County Mental & Behavioral Health System of Care Community Analysis was presented to the Board of County Commissioners today. The report was commissioned by Orange County Mayor Jerry L. Demings through Heart of Florida United Way. The research project was built upon issues found in a 2020 analysis by the Mental Health and Homeless Division of Orange County Government.

“The goal of this study is to get our most vulnerable residents the mental health treatment they need,” said Mayor Demings. “As a former law enforcement leader, I saw far too many mentally ill people wind up in jail, which is the last place they should be. It is my hope the recommendations in this report will help break that cycle.”

The presentation included six key recommendations to improve the mental and behavioral health system within Orange County.

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“According to the Mental Health America 2022 Report, Florida ranks 49th out of the 50 states when it comes to access to mental health services,” stated Jeff Hayward, President & CEO of Heart of Florida United Way. “While the pandemic devastated communities around the world, it brought mental health to the forefront of conversations. In order to create systemic change to help our residents, we must improve our systems, communications and access to mental health services.”

The Research Results

The research was conducted by Dr. Lauren Josephs of Visionary Vanguard Group. It was generated by speaking with more than 200 community stakeholders who work in, contribute to and utilize the mental health behavioral system in Orange County and collected through individual conversations, focus groups,
and surveys. It was further substantiated by a thorough literature review of best practices from across the country.

“The report is the first of many steps toward full development of a first-class system equipped to meet the varied and diverse needs of all Orange County residents,” stated Josephs. “The recommendations touch on all four categories of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s framework for an effective Continuum of Care.”

Primary concerns ranged from lack of knowledge about mental health benefits coverage through insurance and language barriers to increased demand that exceeds the system’s capacity as a result of the pandemic and lack of parity for mental health insurance coverage – to name a few. Overlap was seen in many areas, which allowed for six cohesive recommended actions.

**The Recommendations**

The recommendations are grouped under six key areas of focus identified during the system analysis:

**Integrated and Coordinated Mental and Behavioral Health Care Delivery**, which includes an information technology platform; exploring the use of the Collaborative Care Model or other evidence-based practices to integrate mental health into healthcare settings; development of drop-in and triage centers; and strengthen and expand crisis management activities. **Mental Health Promotion**, which also includes culturally and linguistically appropriate awareness building, education and stigma-reduction campaigns.

**Affordable Housing and Services for Homeless Individuals and Families** includes increasing the availability of affordable housing, supportive housing, assisted living and transitional living facilities. A **Qualified and Available Workforce** focused on training, retention, peer support services, and programs to increase the availability of a qualified workforce. **Mental and Behavioral Health Finances** that strengthen mental health parity regulation and enforcement and reimbursement of evidence-based behavioral health treatments at their true cost. Finally, **Recommendations Implementation** by establishing an “implementation team” to advance the recommendations of the report.

**Next Steps**

It will take upwards of $49 million annually to fully work towards and implement the recommendations set forth. An implementation group was formed, made up of many who contributed to the report. Their job is to prioritize projects and move progress forward.
Click here to view the full report and recommendation explanations in English and Spanish.

**About Heart of Florida United Way**

Heart of Florida United Way (HFUW) is Central Florida’s most comprehensive health and human services charity and the largest provider of funds to the region’s most critical health and human service programs. In 2019-20, it raised and managed more than $34.7 million in total resources, including $29.5 million raised for the Community Fund that invests in dozens of vitally important programs in the community throughout Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties. HFUW fights for the health, education and financial stability of every person in Central Florida. It operates United Way 211, Central Florida’s information and assistance, crisis, suicide and referral helpline; Volunteer Resource Center and the Ryan White program, which administers nearly $3.2 million to provide HIV/AIDS services and referrals. HFUW impacts more than 400,000 individuals annually through its direct service and funded programs. United Way partners with local businesses, government, other charities to increase awareness of local health and human service issues and to inspire hope, provide options and create possibilities for people in need. Visit [www.HFUW.org](http://www.HFUW.org) for more information, or call (407) 835-0900. Follow us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/HeartofFloridaUnitedWay) at Heart of Florida United Way and on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/hfuw) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/hfuw).

**About Orange County Government**

Orange County Government strives to serve its residents and guests with integrity, honesty, fairness and professionalism. Located in Central Florida, Orange County includes 13 municipalities and is home to world-famous theme parks, one of the nation’s largest convention centers and a thriving life science research park. Seven elected members make up the Board of County Commissioners, including the Mayor, who is elected countywide. For more information, please visit [www.OCFL.net](http://www.OCFL.net) or go to [Orange County Government’s social media channels](https://www.facebook.com/orangecountyfl/).