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Kathy Rivera, executive director and CEO of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, says anyone who seeks therapy can get it, no matter their ability to pay.



ONLY IN NEWSDAY

'WE TURN NO ONE AWAY'

As more young people face mental health crises, nonprofits offer help to overcome shortage of care

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We Turn No One Away: Nonprofits Offer Therapy

By Bart Jones

Cover story in Newsday, January 9, 2023

Featuring Kathy Rivera, Executive Director/CEO, North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center

Nonprofits on Long Island say they are offering affordable mental health therapy for teens and young children — without long waiting lists — as the region faces a shortage of psychologists serving those age groups.

Many families in Nassau and Suffolk counties have grown frustrated trying to find private therapists, who often don't take insurance and have waiting lists months long — or no available appointments at all.

The nonprofits are encouraging parents to contact them at a time when depression, anxiety and suicide rates among young people are rising due to a confluence of factors including isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic and heavy social media use.

“Right now, we have capacity to take on cases,” said Kathy Rivera, executive director, and CEO of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, with offices in Manhasset, Roslyn Heights and Westbury.

“We turn no one away for any inability to pay,” she said. “We are grassroots, and we are committed to equity in mental health regardless of what your ZIP code is, what your bank account looks like. Everyone deserves to have access to care.”

The agency has 50 therapists on staff, along with other workers and a department that deals solely with insurance companies, she said. Nonprofits such as North Shore said they can help fill a gap as families struggle to find therapists for their children. Some parents are taking their

kids to private therapist appointments during school hours — the only time slots available — while others are getting saddled with thousands of dollars in bills because their therapists don't take insurance, experts said.

Meanwhile, the number of people between the ages of 12 and 17 nationwide who experienced at least one major depressive episode increased by 306,000, or 1.4%, year-over-year, according to an October 2021 report from the Mental Health America nonprofit. At the same time, nearly 61% of New York youths with major depressive episodes did not receive treatment, the report said.

Finding trusted therapists

Adrienne LoPresti, executive director of YES Community Counseling Center in Massapequa, said her nonprofit also generally has capacity to provide therapists for young people in a timely manner.

“There is a comprehensive system of care for youth and families, which includes YES, that provides affordable services regardless of income and health insurance status,” LoPresti said. “Unfortunately, many community members are unaware of these networks and resources.”

LoPresti cautioned that families should make sure they connect with reputable agencies, since there is a proliferation of people offering “telehealth” appointments who are not always qualified.

“It's important to find access to a vetted mental health provider you trust in your community,” she said. Local schools, ones that have their own psychologists and social workers, can help identify reputable therapists, she added.

While telehealth services offer some advantages, “it is often the financial gains rather than quality care” that is the priority, she said. In-person counseling is generally more effective than on-screen, she added.

Besides YES and North Shore, agencies families can contact to help find a community-based therapist include the Nassau County Helpline, at 516-227-TALK (or 8255), and the Long Island Crisis Center's 24/7 hotline, at 516-679-1111, LoPresti and Rivera said.

Central Nassau Guidance and Counseling Services based in Hicksville also has therapists available and works with families on a sliding scale if they have financial difficulties, CEO Jeffrey Friedman said.

Adapting to diversity

Some agencies are seeking to adapt to Long Island's increasingly diverse population.

North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center has intake staff who speak fluent Spanish and other staff members who can translate Creole and Arabic, Rivera said.

Another agency, the Hispanic Counseling Center, with offices in Hempstead and Bay Shore, focuses on Latino children, youth and adults. Its Mental Health Clinic offers bilingual and bicultural mental health counseling, and refuses services to no one, CEO Claudia Boyle said.

In response to the growing demand, the group is boosting its efforts to hire more therapists, she said.

In Suffolk County, the nonprofit Rise Life Services in Riverhead opened a mental health clinic in November 2021 that includes treatment for children after it saw a growing demand for therapists for that age group, said Tracey Anderson, operations director of clinical services and behavioral health.

Their anticipation of "a high demand for mental health services for youth was certainly on point," she said. "The demand is even higher than we expected."

The nonprofit Family Service League, which works throughout Suffolk County, has seen the need for more therapists firsthand and through its DASH hotline helps families connect with them, said Kathy Rosenthal, senior vice president at the group.

"We are finding youth with higher rates of anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges, and, tragically, an increase in young people attempting and dying by suicide, she said.

The number of teenage suicides her group responded to in Suffolk tripled between 2020 and 2021, going from four to 12, she said.

Families can contact FSL's hotline DASH at 631-952-3333. They can also contact the Suffolk County Response Crisis Center at 631-751-7500 for help in finding a therapist.

Groups representing private therapists said families should not give up on seeking their help. The Suffolk County Psychological Association's website allows families to plug in their hometowns, insurance and other information to try to match them with a therapist, said Ann Eckardt Erlanger, past president of the group. The Nassau County Psychological Association has a similar website mechanism.

Rivera also said families should keep trying to get their children help, despite the obstacles.

"There is hope and an opportunity for healing," she said.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Families in Nassau and Suffolk say** they have become frustrated while seeking private therapists who often won't take insurance and have wait-lists or no available appointments.
- **Long Island nonprofits say they offer affordable** mental health therapy for teens and young children — without long wait lists.
- **The nonprofits are encouraging parents** to contact them at a time when depression, anxiety and suicide rates among young people have climbed because of the pandemic and heavy social media use.