

Thank you Chairman Casey and Senator Scott for the opportunity to be here today.

The South Carolina Department of Mental Health (SCDMH) is a comprehensive, statewide health system that is comprised of 16 mental health centers that provide whole person care, meaning that we are focused on both the physical and mental health of our patients. We work in concert with federally qualified health centers, health systems, as well as non-traditional locations of service including schools, churches and other community partners. Additionally, we operate two free standing psychiatric hospitals, an inpatient substance-use treatment facility, and five veterans' nursing homes. Like all states, South Carolina has seen an increase in the number of individuals seeking care throughout the pandemic. The two populations seeing the greatest increase are the youth and the elderly.

We have identified several reasons for this increased service need. First, social isolation has had an incredible impact on our elderly population. The activities that seniors often find helpful, including attending religious services and going to day programs, among others, were largely unavailable during the pandemic. Secondly is the sense of loss that has been experienced. Over a million Americans have died from COVID or its complications. Greater than 75% of COVID deaths was among individuals 65 and older. The majority of elderly individuals have experienced at least one personal loss over the past two years. Further complicating issues is that many programs serving the elderly either shut down or moved to a virtual platform during the pandemic.

The expansion of telehealth has been able to fill this void. SCDMH cares for approximately 100,000 individuals each year. Twenty percent of those individuals are over 55. In April, 2020, the department moved all of our services virtually and telephonically. Within 2 months, we had at least one therapeutic contact with 99.9% of the patients that we were seeing pre-pandemic. Part of the reason that we were successful in making this shift is because we have had more than 20 years of experience in running a statewide telehealth system that is one of the largest in South Carolina. Additionally, because we are a unified system, we were able to track our service delivery centrally and were able to pool resources across the system. Telehealth was certainly not a panacea, as many of our patients lived in areas with limited broadband coverage or did not have adequate devices or cellular plans that afforded them the amount of data needed to connect to services. Thankfully, we are now fully operational and able to provide both telemedicine as well as in-person care. We have found that our elderly population was able to adjust to these changes.

The challenges of providing care for the aging population are numerous. One of the biggest challenges has been an increase in substance use during the pandemic. Since federal funding for substance use and mental health treatment are split at the federal level, developing programs that address these dual diagnosis issues are challenging. Secondly, many organizations do not provide both mental health and medical services in the same location. As a result, many older Americans have to visit multiple locations to obtain services. Each additional visit increases the likelihood that they will not obtain services.

There are several areas where South Carolina has done an exemplary job:

1. We have developed excellent partnerships with law enforcement to make sure that officers are provided the skills needed to identify and manage mental health crises. We have also increased the presence of mental health professionals in dispatch centers and crisis intervention teams that respond to events where mental health is a possible contributor.
2. South Carolina has been very committed to increasing services for our veteran population. The state has worked closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs to increase the number of veterans' nursing homes in South Carolina. This blending of state and federal funds has made a remarkable difference in our ability to expand services.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee today. I am proud to lead the 4,300 individuals at SCDMH who strive each day to improve the physical and mental health of all South Carolinians. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.