

November 2021

Memo: Community Listening Session on Mental Health Medication Access

Summary:

Access to providers able to prescribe medication for mental health conditions is a great challenge in Washington state that is fraught with myriad barriers. This is increasingly a critical issue as Washington continues to face a behavioral health crisis with increasing rates of people needing to access mental health care services.

This summer, NAMI Washington sent out a survey about mental health care access in our state. The major findings from the survey responses were that: 1) it took too long to get the right mental health care (inclusive of in times of crisis), 2) finding the right provider to meet the person's needs (especially in rural areas and finding BIPOC providers) was often very challenging and 3) cost and insurance adequately covering the needed service were often significant barriers. In asking survey respondents what service they were looking for, the second most selected service was needing access to a psychiatrist or other trained psychiatric provider.

In November, NAMI Washington hosted a specific Community Listening Session that sought to dive a little deeper into hearing the experiences of accessing a prescribing provider and getting a needed medication for mental health conditions in our state.

Participants were from a variety of different geographical areas in Washington:

- 17 % Rural respondents
- 54% Suburban respondents
- 29% Urban respondents

The major experiences that participants reported were:

- *Not being able to find a prescribing provider in a timely manner*
 - *There were limited providers to choose from which hampered timely access.*
 - *Long wait lists were common experiences to see a provider.*
 - *Long wait times to finally access the needed service were also very common.*
- *Not being able to find a provider that could meet their specific mental health needs*
- *Navigating finding a provider was challenging and often an advocate was needed*
 - *When asked to rank how easy it was to find a prescribing provider and get a needed mental health medication, no respondent reported it as being "very easy".*
- *Prior-authorization and out of pocket costs were frequently reported barriers to getting a mental health medication.*
- *Delays in access to a needed mental health medication led to more costly and intensive levels of care.*

Findings on Accessing a Prescribing Provider

Overwhelmingly, respondents reported that it took too long to find a prescribing provider.

- Nearly 50% of participants ranked finding a psychiatric prescribing provider as “very difficult”.
- Many respondents shared that waitlists to see a provider took weeks to months - often exceeding a timeline to appropriately meet the needs of their mental health condition. With delays in accessing care on an appropriate timeline, many reported that this often caused worsening of symptoms that then led to a crisis and more expensive hospital visits.
- Over half of all respondents had to travel more than 10 miles to get to a psychiatric prescribing provider.

Some examples of experiences that respondents shared were:

- *On wait times:*
 - Several participants reported waiting months to see a provider.
 - Respondents also shared that this was particularly challenging while experiencing a crisis or would lead to a crisis because they couldn't access preventative care in time.
 - One person reported that a friend had to go off their mental health medication as they couldn't find an open provider and ultimately went to jail where she received stabilizing medication.
 - Multiple respondents reported having to get on a waitlist for a waitlist to see a provider.
- *On finding the right provider:*
 - Multiple respondents also reported that finding a provider involves navigating a very complex system that can compound barriers to access such as finding a provider in their area, that is in their network, that is accepting clients, and specializes in the person's specific needs.
 - Parents reported feeling that their provider was burned out, especially during the pandemic, and was unable to meet the complex needs of their child.
 - Some people reported that there were challenges during the pandemic as some providers were not taking new clients and were limited in capacity.
- *On traveling to a provider:*
 - Respondents wrote that traveling far to see a provider was a great burden.
- *On issues with Medicare and Medicaid:*
 - Having Medicare disqualified some people from several psychiatrists in their community.
 - Some respondents on Medicare and/or Medicaid reported they had faced challenges with wanting to work more but being unable to for risk of losing benefits due to a slight increase in income.

Findings on Accessing a Prescription

Accessing medication can also present financial burdens.

- 27% of respondents were unable to get the medication that they and their provider preferred.
- 50% of respondents faced cost barriers to getting their needed medication for a mental health condition.
- Frequently, out of pocket costs were reported as very high and unaffordable.

Some examples of experiences that respondents shared were:

- *On cost burdens and insurance coverage:*
 - One respondent noted that the insurance she has because she is self-employed presents her with \$200-300 per month in out of pocket expenses for medication. She does not quite qualify for Medicaid but has found that the marketplace does not have adequate coverage options.
 - Medication for Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder were reported as being extremely costly and unaffordable.
 - One person reported that they are fully insured but that their copay is over \$1,200 per month, which is unaffordable.
 - Another person reported that when their needed medication stopped being a preferred drug, they have become at the mercy of the drug distributor to provide samples, otherwise they would be unable to afford to manage their mental health condition.
 - Another person reported that their insurance didn't cover the dosage of one medication so they have to take two pills to equal the proper dose.
- *On prior-authorization:*
 - Multiple respondents reported that prior-authorization for medications could pose barriers and challenges to navigating the system to get the medication that works for them.
- *On delays to accessing medication:*
 - Multiple respondents reported that delays in getting to a provider caused barriers to getting prescription refills or the correct prescription order which in turn led to complications as many mental health medications have critical procedures for tapering down if going off a medication.
 - One person reported that they were unable to get their needed medication for a couple of months and ended up being hospitalized for a couple of weeks.