

BROADCAST-A new approach to provide mental health support to students

There is no doubt there is a mental health pandemic in this country – a crisis that was already brewing and then made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Kyle Boerke (bur-KEY), director of Outpatient Behavior Health Services for OSF HealthCare, cites as evidence, a concerning report from the World Health Organization (WHO) released last month.

“Identifying a 25% increase in anxiety year-over-year and that was on top of a 50% increase from the year prior to that so if you take a look at the numbers, we truly are not just in a COVID-19 pandemic but a behavioral health pandemic as well.” (:19)

Last year, nearly 10,000 children sought outpatient behavioral health services from OSF and many more are on waiting lists and 16 kids a day were admitted to OSF hospitals for a mental health crisis.

Sister M. Pieta (pee-AY-tuh) is an innovation biomedical engineer at Jump Simulation, and the project manager and engineer for a new [Community Health Advocacy \(CHA\)](#) grant. She says the effort will involve developing an algorithm, using data from school records, to reach students *before* they are in crisis – ideally before they end up in the emergency department for a suicide attempt or extreme anxiety.

Sister Pieta says the algorithm’s criteria would flag students in the school’s information management system so teachers, counselors, and even coaches can see when kids might need additional support.

“They can decide if those flags, those compassion alerts, apply or if that student just has senioritis, or is just underperforming at this moment for a small reason and not a big deal, or if they were absent because they were doing school activities for so long or whatever the case may be. So they can kind of be a first discerner and say ‘Are these alerts?’ and intervention is appropriate and necessary?” (:25)

Dr. Boerke says a model that can process so much data could be more effective in picking up slight changes over time that signal a student might be suffering.

“The beauty of this early identification and detection is we’re going to be able to see those small slips in grades over time, and a child that would have gone under the radar because they’re so quiet out of fear that the attention will be brought to them – and they don’t want that because of their anxiety – they’re going to be able to be identified and receive the help they need as well.” (:21)

Dr. Boerke is excited about this kind of innovation, which will be designed with input from social workers in urban settings to allow for a proactive approach. He says early identification could make a big difference, especially for students who are suffering privately.

“The older they get, the more ingrained those behaviors and those cognitions become; it’s harder work. So, if we can catch it as early as possible we’re going to be in a better position to provide these kiddos with the care they need.” (:13)

If parental consent is given for the program, Sister Pieta says digital and in-person resources can be shared with the student.

“Existing resources in all areas of life, whether it’s in mental health, whether it’s in emotional supports, or even physical and spiritual support; we want to connect them to existing, vetted resources that are age-appropriate.” (:15)

The effort will leverage evidence-based interventions, including OSF SilverCloud, a behavioral health app that Sister Pieta says has proven to reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression in adults.

“So we’ve seen the advantages that it’s brought to adults, and we want to reach our children with that same care, if not more care, because they’re more vulnerable and they’re at a time in their life when they really need that help; that additional support, that additional connection – that heart connection that we’re trying to establish.” (:19)

The project will be developed in phases, starting with schools in the Peoria Catholic Diocese and then expanding to select schools within the Chicago Archdiocese.