

Nurse home visiting program bridges physical, mental health care gap

Program offers additional in-home support for mom and child

By Patrick Mulvihill

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It's not easy being a new mother, especially in rural Oregon where isolation and remoteness can pose daily challenges and impact healthy child development. However, help is available.

A new program in Grant County aims to knock down the hurdles moms face in accessing needed support.

The Integrated Nurse Home Visiting Program, started in late 2018, connects moms who are participating in public health nurse home visiting programs with in-home counseling to further support mom and the child, weaving a more supportive and comforting fabric of care.

How it works

The initiative has begun in four counties so far: Grant, Malheur, Morrow and Umatilla.

Moms involved in home visiting programs — including CaCoon, Babies First, Maternity Case Management and the Nurse Family Partnership — can participate. When certain risk factors are identified, the expanded program is offered to the family.

The in-home support helps families heal and grow after stressful situations. The new care member or counselor specializes in how to help parents use play and regular caretaking activities as a way to help a child and parent feel even more connected. Connection is very important for young children, because it helps them develop a sense of themselves and learn how to control and express emotions.

Local project partners include Community Counseling



Contributed photo

New mothers can get support through a local outreach initiative, the Integrated Nurse Home Visiting Program. In the photo, a boy swings at another wellness program supported by Greater Oregon Behavioral Health, Inc.

Solutions, the Grant County Health Department, Eastern Oregon Healthy Living Alliance and Greater Oregon Behavioral Health, Inc.

"The project helps bridge the gap between physical and mental health care," said Thad Labhart, clinical director at Community Counseling Solutions. "The warm hand-off between nurse and mental health clinician helps with patient retention, and the in-home therapy allows us to access parents and caregivers that need assistance but might not otherwise come into the office for it."

Some perceptions and misconceptions tied to receiving help can be harmful.

Labhart explained, "Mental health stigma is a real issue and is highlighted in a small town where folks know their neighbors. This program helps reduce stigma too."

A serious need

Among the litany of potential struggles related to raising babies, maternal depression is particularly concerning — and local data reflects that.

Over 40 percent of mothers experience depression during pregnancy and within three months following pregnancy, according to the 2017 Pregnancy Risk and Monitoring Survey conducted in Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization counties.

That's why the home visiting program offers a chance to engage community members in a supportive, comforting way.

"We're honored to support this program," said GOBHI Director of Child and Family Systems Jeanne McCarty. "All moms could use this kind of support, so it makes sense bringing help to the home, rather than requiring everyone to travel to a clinic."

A 2018 project report by EOHLA states home visiting is an evidence-based approach to preventing and addressing a variety of issues facing children and families, particularly first-time parents and other high-risk families. Home visiting programs serve families with diverse backgrounds and a variety of needs.

EOHLA Executive Director John Adams stated, "We're committed to helping create a healthy, happy Eastern Oregon, where new moms have access to

needed resources and support, and babies and toddlers have a strong, healthy start."

EOHLA initiated a process to bring together partners throughout the four counties to develop the program, including a yearlong learning collaborative to support its implementation.

How to learn more

The pilot program invites parents, families and community members to learn more about available services.

Please call Jessica Winegar at the Grant County Health Department or Thad Labhart at Community Counseling Solutions, 541-575-1466, for more information. Visit eohla.org for details.

Patrick Mulvihill is the communications coordinator for Greater Oregon Behavioral Health, Inc. The Eastern Oregon Healthy Living Alliance also contributed to this article.