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New statewide initiative aims to improve healthcare for Montanans affected by mental illness, addiction, and medical problems like diabetes

Bozeman, Mont. – The Montana Healthcare Foundation (MHCF) today announced a new, statewide initiative to support better healthcare for people who have a combination of medical problems, mental illness and/or addiction. Hospitals and communities throughout Montana rank drug and alcohol addiction and mental illness as their most challenging health issues, but services can be hard to find and difficult to access. Through grants and technical assistance from the National Council for Behavioral Health, MHCF aims to make so-called “integrated behavioral health” or “IBH” services broadly available in Montana. The first round of grantees includes some of Montana’s largest medical systems as well as rural and tribal clinics around the state. The Foundation said it expects to commit more than three million dollars to this initiative.

“People with common problems like depression or addiction often die far too early,” said MHCF CEO, Dr. Aaron Wernham. “In many cases, this happens because these illnesses make it harder for people to focus on their other medical problems like diabetes or heart disease. When people can get all of their healthcare needs met under one roof in a seamless, well-coordinated way, they get better faster. Study after study has shown that this ‘no wrong door’ approach to care gets better results and lowers medical costs.”

“Integrating behavioral health within our Providence clinics allows us to treat the whole person—and take the necessary steps to begin addressing our national mental health crisis,” said Dr. Samer Khodor, regional chief physician executive for Providence Western Montana.

Through MHCF’s new IBH initiative, the Foundation is supporting healthcare providers around Montana that are ready to take on the challenge of providing team-based, “whole-person” care. Grantees will offer primary care, mental health and addiction treatment under one roof, or work to coordinate these services within a community. A few of the MHCF grant-funded projects include:

1. **Benefis Health System** *will integrate behavioral health into their primary care practice, and take initial steps to support broader implementation by regional partners in Cascade County and north central Montana including the VA clinic, independent primary care providers and regional tribal clinics.*
2. **Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Health Department** *will formulate a strategic plan to integrate their behavioral health and primary care practices, and train behavioral health staff and primary care providers on conducting motivational interviews and brief interventions. The project will have an initial focus on chronic pain.*

3. **Holy Rosary Healthcare** will collaborate with Eastern Montana Mental Health Center to expand access to behavioral health services by adopting an integrated behavioral health care model in the primary care setting based on proven national best practices in patient care.
4. **Madison County** will work with the Local Advisory Council on Mental Health, Ruby Valley Hospital, Madison Valley Medical Center and Western Montana Mental Health Center to integrate existing services and resources provided in the community.
5. **North Valley Hospital** will provide integrated behavioral health services in a school- based health center serving at-risk students in Columbia Falls; and will also move towards providing integrated behavioral health in the primary care clinic.
6. **Providence Health & Services** will integrate behavioral health into Grant Creek Family Practice and use that as a foundation to explore integrated behavioral health in other settings.

“Chronic pain and opioid abuse are some of the most gripping problems in our community, and our primary care providers are on the frontline addressing these issues,” said Kevin Howlett, director of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Health Department. “By integrating our primary care with behavioral health and other ancillary services, we will bring the full force of the Tribal Health Department to these epidemics. Chronic pain will be our initial focus, and from there we plan on expanding our integrated services to other preventable diseases such as diabetics, obesity, heart disease and mental illness.”

For more information on MHCF’s Integrated Behavioral Health Initiative, along with a complete list of current grantees please visit our website at www.mthcf.org. For MHCF’s recent report on integrated behavioral health in Montana, click [here](#).

About the Montana Healthcare Foundation

MHCF was created in 2013, and makes strategic investments to improve the health and healthcare of Montanans. MHCF was formed as the result of the sale of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Montana to a private corporation. In accordance with State law, the assets were transferred to a charitable trust to be managed for public benefit. Currently, MHCF has approximately \$120 million in assets. The Foundation is a permanent resource for Montanans; and will spend the income from trust investments (estimated at roughly five percent of the total value of the trust each year) on grant disbursements and related programs and expenses, providing a stable, reliable resource supporting health for Montanans.

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