

Georgia Hotline Brings All-Hours Help to Mental Health

By Mikel Chavers

A call came into the 24 hours a day, seven days a week **Georgia Crisis and Access Line** and Jana Pruett, a licensed clinician, answered.

On the line was a woman who was very depressed. She had her entire supply of psychiatric medication with her. Her husband and child were out at the pool and she was alone and feeling suicidal.

Pruett could hear the desperation in the woman's voice. While talking with the woman, trying various methods to help her, Pruett looked up the woman's address in the white pages. At some point the woman hung up and Pruett called right back. The woman had taken all her pills; she had overdosed.

Pruett immediately dispatched emergency services to the woman and stayed with her on the phone. "I stayed and tried to keep her as awake as I could," she said.

The paramedics got there just as the woman was beginning to lose consciousness—but they got there just in time to save her life, Pruett said.

That's just one miracle of the Georgia Crisis and Access Line, the special hotline created by Georgia's Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases. It serves Georgia's mental health customers and helps a stigmatized audience navigate the complicated world of getting help. The service is one of eight national winners of a CSG Innovations Award.

Before the statewide hotline came along, those looking for mental health help had to wade through layers of bureaucracy and agency lingo. People had to know what community service board served their

area and had to call one of 25 phone numbers to access help. That was not an easy task, said Gwendolyn Skinner, director of the division that runs the hotline.

"And so what happens as a result of that is that people were going into crisis and the only place that they would show up would be in emergency rooms or local law enforcement would be called because you would have some domestic issues," she said.

But crisis intervention is a real-time business.

Those 25 phone numbers were often unreliable, said David Covington, CEO and partner of Behavioral Health Link, the company that Georgia contracts with for the special hotline.

"You had a lot of difficulty having 24/7 reliable access," he said. "During business hours you could probably reach someone, but again it wasn't going to be a clinician answering the phone in most of the areas of the state. And after hours there was extreme variability in being able to reach anyone."

But what's more, once a customer reached the right person, the wait times for an appointment were often frustrating—patients could wait anywhere from three weeks to three months in some areas, Covington said.

The new hotline changed all that. And not without some high-tech tools—this isn't the typical call center.

Counselors and clinicians have the ability to schedule real-time appointments for callers—callers are never put on hold. That's because the crisis line works with the state's mental health providers



A worker with the Georgia Crisis and Access Line is busy answering calls.

to allot appointment slots just for callers.

Workers like Pruett can easily access all the providers available to each caller through a database—and those are listed in order of closest, fastest and best quality. That information pops up on Pruett's computer screen.

"It makes it really easy to sit

on the phone and really connect with that person when you've got all that stuff already taken care of and it's on the screen easy to navigate," Pruett said. Then I can focus on really connecting with that person and collaborate with them and not just seem like I'm going through a list of 20 questions."

FAST FACTS

- Three out of four callers are seeking help for themselves or for a loved one. One in four callers are professionals such as law enforcement officers, schools, community mental health providers and faith-based leaders.
- A typical call lasts on average seven minutes—however, a mental health emergency call just "takes as long as it takes," said David Covington, CEO and partner of Behavioral Health Link. Those types of calls can take anywhere from 30 minutes to three hours, he said.
- The Georgia Crisis and Access Line saved the state \$12.5 million by referring callers to appropriate community resources, which helped to avoid unnecessary hospital emergency room trips.