



AltaPointe pilot program for schizophrenia patients to become national model

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MOBILE, Alabama -- In late 2010, AltaPointe Health Systems in Mobile was selected by the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare as one of 10 sites for a pilot program designed to advance care standards for those living with schizophrenia.

The initiative -- which involved 10 behavioral health organizations in the U.S. -- was designed to improve the daily functions of people with the mental illness and raise expectations for what they can achieve.

After completing the 8-month program, AltaPointe officials said the study showed a rise in overall functioning scores for schizophrenia patients and a statistically significant increase in communication and coping skills, among other factors.

"We were doing a lot of things already to work with this population," said Dr. Sandra Parker of AltaPointe. "We put some additional programs in place -- measurable and quantifiable -- and showed that it works."

Classified as a thought disorder, schizophrenia is a severe mental illness characterized by delusions, hallucinations, incoherence and often physical agitation among patients. It's estimated that about 2.4 million Americans suffer with the disease.

In Mobile, 41 people completed the program at AltaPointe. More than 10 percent of those treated at AltaPointe are diagnosed with schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder, making the outcomes of the pilot program particularly important, a spokeswoman said.

Parker said one specific goal was to help patients communicate what they are feeling "to be able to discuss it with family members or close personal friends" to help them learn to talk about their illness in a comfortable way.

"It also helped them learn how to better monitor their illness," Parker said. "It's very important to recognize their symptoms."

During the pilot program, some patients worked on getting their GED; others embarked on healthy eating plans as they cut back on cigarette smoking, according to AltaPointe staff members.

The National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare represents more than 1,700 mental health and addiction treatment organizations. The group serves about 8 million low-income children and adults struggling with mental health and addiction disorders.

Now that the pilot program was shown to be successful, AltaPointe's Parker said, it can be a model for other centers across the state and country.

"It's helped me learn anger management skills," said Christopher Patterson, who took part in the program. "When I get angry, instead of acting violent or acting out, I do artwork and draw the anger out or talk to somebody or lift weights or swim."

Patterson said he decided to work toward earning a GED in recent months, and even applied for a job at a local drugstore. "Right now, I'm studying an auto mechanic book."

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