Advocate

Youth mental health expands in St. Joe County

Enhanced resources for suicide prevention programs

Coming Soon

SUCCESS AT MOTELS4NOW
Youth mental health expands in St. Joe County

A Publication of The Oaklawn Foundation for Mental Health

Spring 2021
A word from the director

Dear friends,

We’ve begun 2021 with a renewed focus on the future. Last year was tough, but Oaklawn came out stronger – and even more committed, in all circumstances, to our mission of delivering exceptional mental health and addiction treatment to our community.

As we plan for the years to come, we’re going beyond – beyond the scope of traditional mental health treatment. We’re not going to wait until people’s lives, jobs and families are upended to intervene. We’re not going to wait until someone gets suspended, arrested or hospitalized to get them help. We’re raising the bar.

Over the past decade, Oaklawn has piloted numerous innovative models for prevention, early intervention and client engagement. They work! Kids and families get help faster, people stay engaged in treatment and long-term outcomes are improved. And, it lessens the financial burden to the community by reducing the need for high-end services. With your help, the Oaklawn Foundation will go beyond to sustain these programs.

Here’s a few things we’re asking for your help to continue, and a new service we’re adding this year:

- **Partnership for Children.** Started in 2015 in Elkhart County, this program brings together youth-serving agencies to train staff in youth mental health and identify at-risk youth earlier. We’re excited to expand this service to St. Joseph County this year! Read more about this exciting work on page 4.

- **Camp Mariposa.** This free camp serves 9- to 12-year-olds who have been impacted by the addiction of a loved one. It teaches youth about addiction, their risk and ways to protect themselves. It also addresses trauma from their loved one’s addiction.

- **Recovery coaches.** Recovery coaches provide peer-level services to clients dealing with mental health and/or addiction issues. This additional engagement from someone who’s “been there” is invaluable in keeping people connected, especially in the earliest and hardest days of recovery. Read about how our recovery coaches are engaging people who are homeless on page 4.

- **Suicide prevention.** We’re excited to announce the addition of a suicide prevention specialist who will engage youth at local schools, churches and organizations. Read more about her personal story and future work on page 2.

Please join us in sustaining these programs by making a gift to the Oaklawn Foundation at www.oaklawndoante.org/give or by sending your gift to the Oaklawn Foundation, 330 Lakeview Drive, Goshen, IN 46528. If you’d like to learn more or discuss ways you can support this work, call me at 574-533-1234, ext. 2066.

We’re so excited to partner with people and businesses in our community to keep mental health moving forward. Together, we’re making a difference in people’s lives.

Gratefully,

Kari Tarman

Executive Director
Oaklawn Foundation

Mission:
With uncommon expertise in mental health and addiction services, Oaklawn joins with individuals, families and our community on the journey toward health and wholeness.

Vision:
To help people live in harmony with self, others and God, through healing and growth of the whole person.

Values:
As a faith-based organization, the people of Oaklawn are committed to:
- Compassion
- Integrity
- Human dignity
- Professional expertise
- Community partnerships
Recovery coaches play crucial role in Motels4Now

Oaklawn recovery coaches are playing an important role in the innovative county-wide collaboration Motels4Now. The program started as a temporary solution to Tent City, the homeless encampment in downtown South Bend. Motels4Now houses 126 people, which includes 14 families with 21 children.

Oaklawn recovery coaches are on site from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week, helping residents connect with available resources: mental health and addiction treatment, disability benefits, food stamps, health insurance, Section 8 housing and more.

Brandy House, team leader for recovery coaches, says they’ve helped four people enter inpatient treatment, two have moved into permanent housing and eight people have gotten jobs. More are applying for jobs.

Although working with a recovery coach isn’t a requirement of the program, they are seeing high engagement due to the success of following a “Housing First” model, House says. “Now, everyone has a place to live. They have warm water and heat and a bed to lay down on. They can get up every morning and work on other goals.”

Partnership for Children expands to St. Joe County

Oaklawn is excited to announce that Partnership for Children (PFC), the innovative pilot program launched in Elkhart County nearly six years ago, is expanding to St. Joseph County thanks to several generous donors. The program will bring together youth-serving agencies to identify at-risk youth earlier, get them help faster and improve outcomes for children, families and youth care workers.

It does this through providing free training and consultation to staff at the partner agencies, connecting youth to formal mental health treatment when indicated and covering the cost of services if payment is a barrier.

The program is fully funded through the first year thanks to United Way of St. Joseph County, St. Joseph County Community Foundation, Beacon Health System, Judd Leighton Foundation, Ancon Construction, TCU Foundation, Radiology Inc. Foundation and an anonymous donor.

“This is an incredible opportunity for our community,” said Dr. Kristin Tawadros, Oaklawn’s vice president of Child & Adolescent Outpatient services and program director. “By bringing evidence-based training to youth serving agencies, referrals are prioritized for services. If families can’t afford the needed services, PFC funding covers it.

Addressing those behavioral health issues sooner rather than later leads to better outcomes for the youth/family and a decreased financial burden to the community – a fact the Elkhart County model has proven. In tracking their engagement, 96 percent of the youth in PFC Elkhart avoid or reduce utilization of high-end services such as juvenile justice, foster care and hospitalization.

But for the families who benefit, they say they can’t put a price tag on how it’s helped them. Ashley Hagelgans felt like she was at the end of her rope trying to help her son, Shawn, who was increasingly getting into trouble at school and Boys and Girls Club Middlebury.

She saw he was going down the wrong path, and nothing she or her husband did seemed to be able to stop it. Then, they found Partnership for Children in Elkhart.

“In the end, it was a truly life-saving program,” she said, “not only for our son, but for us as a family.”
No one really dies from suicide. That’s what Leslie Weirich believes. People die by their own hand because for a moment, even just a split second, they lose all hope.

Leslie, who recently joined Oaklawn as a suicide prevention specialist, is fighting like our kids’ lives depend on it. They do. Among people age 10 to 34, suicide is the second leading cause of death.

“Every eight hours, someone takes their life in the state of Indiana. It’s way too high,” she says, tears welling up in her eyes. She’s imagining some parent getting a knock on their door – answering it only to hear the worst possible news – and she’s remembering when it happened to her.

September 10, 2016
At 2:30 in the morning, September 10, 2016, Leslie awoke to “a pounding on my front door and a ringing at my doorbell like my house was on fire.” She looked out the window to see a police car, and opened the door to an officer asking, “Do you have a son named Austin Weirich who attends Wabash College?” “Yes.” “You need to call this number right away.”

She ran for her cell phone and dialed. It was the dean of the college, telling her Austin had shot himself and was being airlifted to Indianapolis. She and her husband needed to come as quickly as possible.

They drove in the middle of the night, in the worst thunder and lightning she’d ever seen. But they only got about 30 minutes down the road when her phone rang. It was the emergency room doctor, telling her Austin had died. He was only 20.

Austin Weirich
“My son was an overachiever,” Leslie said. “He had taken weighted classes for college and high school. He graduated above a 4.0. He ran track and played football. He was a scholar athlete. He was president of his freshman, sophomore, junior and senior class.”

He had his choice of colleges, and fell in love with Wabash, a small, all-male school in Crawfordsville where he played football and became a campus leader.
He had all kinds of plans for the future. Big plans for his career – he was passionate about leadership and wanted to be a speaker. Plans around campus – he was scheduled to speak about mental health just days after he died. He had small plans – plans to call his mom on Sunday, their weekly ritual. Those were his last words to Leslie. “I’ll talk to you on Sunday, Mom.”

How does it happen?
There’s never just one thing that causes someone to take their life, Leslie says. Each situation is highly specific and reflects a combination of factors.

For Austin, “we look back now, and we realize he battled depression, but he masked it extremely well in perfectionism,” Leslie said.

During his freshman year of college, Austin suffered several football injuries that derailed his sports career and left him in pain. And, he had always struggled with relationships and was in a very unhealthy one at the time he died.

But for young people, there’s a biological factor at play: Their prefrontal cortex is not fully developed. It won’t be fully developed until age 27.

“Austin was 6-foot-4, 240 pounds. He looked like a grown man. But he had seven more years for his brain to be fully developed,” Leslie says. “That night, when my son was in the heat of an argument, he couldn’t reason his way through that moment. He couldn’t grab ahold of that prefrontal cortex and slow it down and see that this was just a temporary problem.”

Where do we go from here?
In the years since Austin’s death, Leslie has devoted herself to understanding suicide and educating youth and families about its very real risk to youth from all walks of life. She speaks at schools, churches and youth organizations, sharing her story and teaching kids about healthy coping skills, healthy relationships and that most critical component: their prefrontal cortex.

“That’s the logic, the reasoning, the higher-level thinking. So if you throw anything in on top of that – relationships or alcohol, prescription meds, Xanax – if you throw that on top of all those emotions and an immature prefrontal cortex, it’s a recipe for suicide,” Leslie said.

She’s partnering with others to get more evidence-based resources into the hands of young people and the adults in their lives. That’s where her partnership with Oaklawn is especially unique. Oaklawn’s experience in implementing best practices is long, and in some school systems where funding is an issue, the Oaklawn Foundation can help.

“For Leslie, it’s deeply personal, but also very pragmatic.

“I don’t want any other family to go through what we went through,” she said. “It’s not about me. It’s about our kids.”

If you’d like to partner with Oaklawn to fund Leslie’s work in our community, or to invite her to speak to your organization, contact the Oaklawn Foundation at (574) 533-1234, ext. 2066.
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