

4-1-2013

Supporting Behavioral Health in Rural Idaho

Susan Esp
Boise State University

Elizabeth "Lee" Hannah
Boise State University

Supporting Behavioral Health in Rural Idaho

By Susan M. Esp, Elizabeth "Lee" Hannah

Multiple factors affect the health of individuals and communities. Current determinants of health addressed by the World Health Organization's 2020 goals include social factors, physical environments, policymaking, and individual behaviors. Behavioral health, defined here as including both substance use disorders (including alcohol) and mental health disorders, is an additional determinant of physical health that is often disregarded or minimized by current health determinant models. According to L.G. Gamm, S. Stone, and S. Pittman, behavioral health disorders affect approximately half of the population in the United States over a lifetime and are among the most impairing of chronic diseases.

Substance Use Disorders

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University reports that adolescent substance abuse is the number one public health issue in America and that it has reached epidemic proportions. According to the Idaho Health and Welfare, Idaho Youth Risk Behavior Survey, (2010–11), 46 percent of high-school students in Idaho report current use of addictive substances. This number exceeds the prevalence rates of many other health risk behaviors that are considered epidemic among teens in the United States. Substance use disorders, particularly alcohol abuse, are major contributors to the three leading causes of death among adolescents—accidents, homicides, and suicides. Substance use disorders also increase the

risk of potentially fatal health conditions in adults including cancer, heart disease, and respiratory illness.

Mental Health Disorders

Mental health disorders influence the onset, progression, and outcome of other co-morbid diseases. In addition, mental health conditions have been correlated with health risk behaviors such as substance abuse, tobacco use, and physical inactivity. Idaho data from the 2010–11 National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicates that rates of past year serious psychological distress were higher in Idaho than the country as a whole, particularly among the age groups of 12–17 and 18–25. Idaho prevalence rates of depression for these two age groups have been among the highest in the country since 2004. Physical health problems that can arise from poor mental health include heart disease, chronic lung disease, injuries, HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Rural Challenges

Idaho is a predominantly rural state with a population of approximately 1,600,000. About 40 percent of the population lives within the metropolitan area of Boise. The rest of the population lives in smaller cities and towns, or in frontier areas. While the prevalence of behavioral health disorders appears to be similar in rural and urban areas, those living in rural areas are more likely than urban residents to see primary care practitioners for behavioral health conditions. This is particularly

Additional resources at
www.nwpublichealth.org



