Rising suicide, drug-addiction and violence rates nationally are just one manifestation of mental health needs that challenge and sometimes stretch behavioral resources. Behavioral health services, though, have long been an integral offering of Lourdes Medical Center of Burlington County. Uniquely, that program today not only includes inpatient units for adult and crisis care, but also separately for senior care with medical support. Offering 48 inpatient beds across these units, the services at Lourdes Burlington provide a rare depth and breadth of care. Using the most up-to-date range of therapies delivered by a complete complement of behavioral health providers, the Lourdes team stabilizes and treats patients, while safeguarding their medical status in a hospital environment and preparing them for continued outpatient care.

“Everyone is affected by the mental health status of our society and knows of someone who has needed acute care,” said Vanessa Ventura, RN, a psychiatric nurse in the program. “Our facility provides that backstop when needs are intensive. We work with our patients on multiple levels to help them reset and restart.”

Four Customized Units for Acute Needs
Lourdes behavioral health offers these essential units to its medical service area in southern New Jersey:

- **The Crisis Unit.** The Willingboro campus of Lourdes Health System is the designated emergency screening and crisis intervention program (SCIP) for Burlington County.

- **Short-Term Care Facility.** For patients who pose a risk to themselves or others, the experienced staff of this 18-bed, involuntary-admission unit provides emergency stabilization, individual assessments and short-term inpatient stays, as well as referral and transition to further treatment that may include longer-term inpatient services, partial hospitalization programs, intensive outpatient care or outpatient treatment. Many come to the unit through the emergency department and via law enforcement.

- **Adult Behavioral Health Program.** Lourdes Burlington also offers care for adult patients whose behavioral health condition requires inpatient care. This includes evaluation and ongoing medical-psychiatric stabilization and treatment for voluntary stays, as well as transitional or follow-up referral for additional services within or outside of Lourdes Health System. The 10-bed unit is for individuals needing admission for acute or chronic psychiatric disorders, often with concomitant substance abuse. Patient issues frequently include suicidality, hallucination or severe anxiety or mood disorder.

- **Senior Behavior Health Program.** This special service is designed for patients 55 and older who have a psychiatric diagnosis (that may include dementia) but may also need concurrent medical care. The multidisciplinary staff of this established program provides management for such patients in a newly revamped 20-bed unit.

**Multi-Level, Multi-Faceted Care**

“Patients who come to the senior program have often had a life event that induces a mental health crisis or have a longer-term organic deficit—and then also accompanying health issues,” said Amy Brennan, the community education manager in the program, which has formed close community relationships with organizations such as the Alzheimer’s Association.

The senior unit can support medical needs, including requirements for oxygen therapy or cardiac support. Patients usually arrive voluntarily after a sudden change in behavior, sometimes under the auspices of a guardian or individual with medical power of attorney.

All of Lourdes’ behavioral health inpatient units provide treatment on multiple levels, including medical treatment and counseling, as well as interventions that help patients re-engage, such as movement, dance and music therapies. In all cases, the approach to planning and care is highly individualized.
A Delightful Feature: Success with Canine Therapy on Inpatient Mental Health Units at Lourdes

On Lourdes inpatient psychiatric units, guess what “staff” member can almost always get a patient to interact who hasn’t responded much with anyone yet? What “therapist” can always pull a smile from patients and get them to engage with each other and those around them, when they haven’t before? What team members’ names get called out joyously down the hall as soon as they walk on the unit? Hint: these “clinicians” have four feet, not two.

Lourdes has been pioneering the use of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) on its inpatient psychiatric units for several years now. Tri-State Canine Response Team, a nonprofit, volunteer New Jersey group for emotional-support dogs, has partnered with Lourdes, and achieved a strong reception and response.

“Our dogs and handlers are specially trained in psychological aid and in interacting with patients who are having significant mental health challenges,” said volunteer Kate Rubenstone, who helped develop the Lourdes pet therapy program.

The strategy goes beyond more-typical informal pet therapy. AAT is a goal-based intervention, in collaboration with the behavioral health staff. It seeks to improve human physical, social, emotional and cognitive function. The teams are registered with a national therapy dog organization and must pass tests that include role playing and active listening skills.

The program also extends to short-term care, nursing floors and rehabilitation units at Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center and Lourdes Medical Center of Burlington County, as well as outpatient offices. In addition, the Tri-State Canine dogs and handlers work with crisis and emergency response organizations. The working service dogs have travelled around the country when called to assist in high-profile incidents, including the most significant recent mass shootings over the last several years.

“Our patients respond very positively to the animal therapy,” said Marc Rothman, MD, medical director for behavioral health services at Lourdes. “It can bring patients out of their shell, and it’s synergistic with other types of therapies we use to engage patients.”

Said Janice Campbell, one of the founders of Tri-State, “On the psych units in particular, I’ve known of patients who have embraced a dog and said, ‘Doctor, this is what you should be writing me a prescription for. He took my pain away.’”

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