



“I think the biggest health challenge facing the community and beyond would be mental health issues. For as long as I know, that issue has been stigmatized and folks have been reluctant to get help or have not gotten help because of the stigma pertaining to mental health...Mental health issues are just as important as physical health issues. They are intertwined.”

—**Sandra Chapman, JD**
Former president of the West Virginia Board of Education

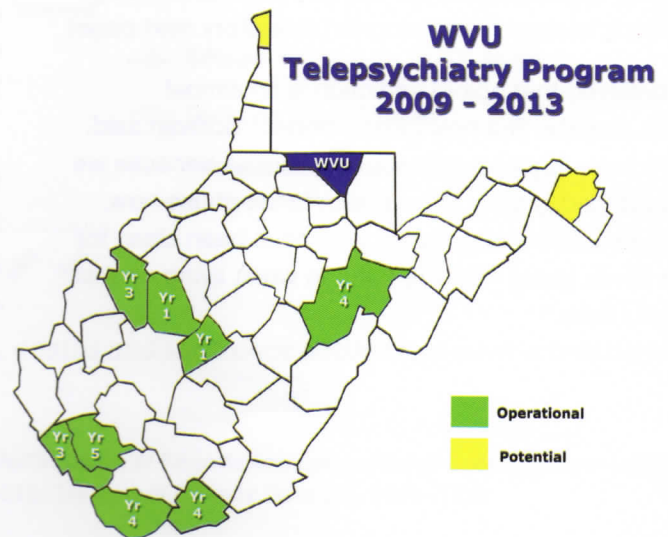
Treatment works but few have access

Telepsychiatry aids patients

by Danielle Conaway

Only 44 percent of adults living in West Virginia with serious mental illness are being treated.

Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness



WVU psychiatrists provide adult, child, and adolescent telepsychiatry services in eight rural West Virginia counties.



photo Heidi Specht

Dr. Patrick Marshalek treats mental health and addiction patients in rural West Virginia counties through telepsychiatry. The patient and partnering medical staff at the remote location communicate with the WVU doctor via a web camera and a secure, HIPPA-compliant computer server.

"I was holed up in a hotel for two weeks doing drugs," recalled Jessica*, who lives in a rural West Virginia town. "My family thought I was dead."

That day was a long time coming. Her mother and grandfather were alcoholics and addicts, and she first started doing drugs with her mother. Crack, cocaine, LSD, marijuana, heroin, OxyContin, prescription pills, crystal meth – she said they tried almost every drug. "At the time, it seemed normal and kind of a fun way to bond with her, but now I know that's just crazy."

Other family members tried many times to convince her to enter a detox program. She nearly lost custody of her daughter forever, and she was in and out of rehab for years. But in that hotel, during a drug binge that could have ended her life, she had a moment of powerful clarity. "I know it sounds crazy, but it was just a spiritual moment where I knew I had to get help. I told my grandma I was coming home, and I got into the program," she said.

But for people fighting addiction in West Virginia, help isn't always easy to find.

"There aren't nearly enough resources for patients," said WVU psychiatrist Patrick J. Marshalek (MD, '06). "The state needs expanded addiction services at all levels, including acute

inpatient, outpatient, and residential. Resources available to those without insurance are lacking even further."

Jessica was lucky. She found an intensive outpatient program at the Prestera Center – a behavioral medicine system serving eight central and southern West Virginia counties. Though the two have never met in person, the program also includes regular telepsychiatry sessions with Dr. Marshalek over a secure Internet video connection.

Psychiatrists at the WVU Chestnut Ridge Center in Morgantown provide adult, child, and adolescent telepsychiatry clinics in eight West Virginia counties. "In Morgantown, we've seen patients who commute from as far away as McDowell County due to scarcity of treatment providers. Physical and emotional pain from poor socioeconomic standing makes opioids seem alluring. In some ways, rural areas aren't very different from urban areas when it comes to opioid addiction," Marshalek said.

At partnering medical sites like Prestera Center and Southern Highlands Community Mental Health Center, a certified addiction counselor or a behavioral health nurse on site works with the WVU psychiatrist at

Chestnut Ridge Center in Morgantown. "Telemedicine allows us to put a physician in a place where previously it was not possible because of financial or travel reasons. We still get to deliver high quality care that we are used to delivering in person," Marshalek said.

At first, Jessica said, it was a little intimidating to talk with a doctor through a computer screen and a web cam. But she grew more comfortable with Marshalek quickly. "He honestly cares and always wants to help. If you make a mistake, he gives you a second chance. Without this program, I would not be getting the care that I need."

But WVU's telepsychiatry program isn't reaching everyone who needs it. Waiting lists for the clinics are in the hundreds. And many others aren't seeking the care they need.

Fear of disclosure or rejection from friends or family are a few reasons why people with a mental illness or an addiction might not seek help. "There's a stigma related to mental health issues in general and an additional stigma on addiction. Addiction should be viewed more as a chronic illness or a chronic disease," Marshalek said. "Folks can get better given the right types of treatment. We can make this better. It's not like waving a magic wand, and it's healed, but it's a manageable condition over time."

*Name has been changed