

Cross-Country Perspectives on the Evolution of Rural Behavioral Health

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On October 26 and 27, the International Initiative on Mental Health Leadership (IIMHL) will conduct its cross-country summit held approximately every 18 months in a different country. Originally intended to be held in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2021, the Summit was postponed until now because of COVID-19 concerns and subsequently disaggregated into meetings in three regional hubs—Christchurch, Dublin, Ireland, and Washington, DC. In preparation for this Summit, the Rural Behavioral Health Collaborative operated by IIMHL hosted three virtual sessions that matched participants from member countries. This is a report on these three sessions. In each instance, I will identify persons who you might contact for additional information.

The first session, “Fostering Engagement and Ownership in Rural Communities” was led by Dennis Mohatt of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (dmohatt@wiche.org) and me. This session explored how to address the rapidly growing problem of psychological and financial disengagement in rural communities. The expansion of agri-corps and big-box and online stores is destroying family farms and small, locally-owned businesses, as well as the surrounding communities that support them.

Three different efforts were described to counter this trend. Project Thrive, in Allen County, Kansas, has converted a dying rural community into a vibrant, engaging place to live (Lisse Regehr: lisse.regehr@thriveallencounty.org). Similarly, the Together with Veterans Program seeks to place US military veterans into rural

settings, where they can become engaged in local community life (Jason Alves: jalves@wiche.edu). Finally, new national legislation in the Philippines has made possible a new approach to behavioral health in rural communities, including deployment of local primary care physicians, nurses, and peers (Rodney Boncajes: rodneyrboncajes@gmail.com).

The second session, “COVID-19 and Rural Wellbeing”, was led by Hazel Dalton (hdalton@csu.edu.au) and David Perkins (davidallanperkins@gmail.com), two experts in rural behavioral health from Australia. This session described results from a recent survey conducted to assess the effects of COVID-19 in rural communities in Australia, particularly its effects on personal and community wellbeing.

The survey results show clearly that COVID-19 has had adverse consequences on rural communities. Further, the session documented the movement of people from urban to rural settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has created additional housing shortages in rural communities, as well as increased the prices for houses. These effects of COVID-19 are in addition to other adverse events already present in rural communities, such as social isolation, increases in the diseases of despair, and farmer suicides, which also have grown during the pandemic. One of the recommendations that emerged during the session was for new approaches to national and philanthropic funding in these communities, since short-term grants are not adequate to address the current issues.

The third session, “Community Wellbeing” was led by Tammy Heinz from the Hogg Foundation (tammy.heinz@austin.utexas.edu) and Gerard Vaughn from New Zealand (gerard_vaughan@xtra.co.nz).

The focus for this session was a project undertaken by the Hogg Foundation to facilitate the growth of empowered communities in five

counties in Texas. This work has emphasized the importance of listening to the community, incorporating historically excluded groups, promoting indigenous leadership, and engaging the full community in social events.

Broad agreement emerged in this third session that development and maintenance of empowered communities is essential to improving their ongoing behavioral health and wellbeing. Such efforts will also improve the social and physical determinants of health in these communities and thus reduce trauma and subsequent behavioral health conditions.

Clearly, empowered communities that function well are essential for the survival of rural life. They are the wellhead of both personal and social wellbeing. This is equally true across cultures--in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. We must continue to develop new funding streams, new mechanisms, such as cooperatives, and new social opportunities to make this a reality for rural communities everywhere.