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How Miami Dade College is using teletherapy to reach more students in need

WLRN 91.3 FM | By [Kate Payne](#)

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Miami Dade College is turning to telehealth to meet students' rapidly growing need for mental health services.

[College students](#) across the country were in need of mental health services long before COVID-19 hit. That [need](#) is even greater due to the isolation, stress and grief brought on by the pandemic.

Many state and community colleges – including Miami Dade College – don't have a dedicated on-site [counseling center](#). Now they're turning to outside [telehealth](#) providers to help students cope.

“When we first started offering the services, the services were really not being utilized to the maximum capacity. And it was not until the pandemic that it’s as if people were given a reason that it was okay not to be okay,” said Jaime Anzalotta, who oversees student wellness at Miami Dade College.

“I think what the pandemic did was, it almost leveled society,” he said. “Everyone was going through the same thing at the same time.”

In a national [survey](#) of college students in 2019, 45% of respondents reported feeling “so depressed that it was difficult to function” and 65% said they had experienced “overwhelming anxiety”.

By the spring of 2022, [56%](#) of students rated their mental health as fair or poor but [24%](#) said they didn’t know where to seek help for their mental health on their college campus, according to a [survey](#) of undergraduates across the country.

"Anxiety, depression and stress and adjustment disorders are the three top reasons that students indicate. And the pandemic really shifted a lot of the almost repressed mental health concerns that students had."

WLRN education reporter Kate Payne spoke with Jaime Anzalotta, the Vice Provost of Student Affairs at Miami Dade College, to learn more about what the school is doing to meet the growing need for counseling – and to educate students about the resources available.

The following is an excerpt of their conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity.

WLRN: There was a significant need for mental health services well before the pandemic on college campuses. How have you seen the need for counseling and support at MDC change since COVID?

ANZALOTTA: What the pandemic did was it almost leveled society, right? And it was as if, it was ok not to be ok. So when you look at the numbers pre-pandemic [in 2020] 207 students received mental health services. And that’s really when we first started launching – very intentionally – mental health. Right now, that number has tripled post-pandemic.

Anxiety, depression and stress and adjustment disorders are the three top reasons that students indicate. And the pandemic really shifted a lot of the almost...repressed mental health concerns that students had.

And let's not forget who our students are at Miami Dade College. First time in college, first generation [college students], [73%](#) of our students are Hispanic...all those great statistics come with a story.



Jaime Anzalotta, who oversees student wellness at Miami Dade College

How do those lived experiences affect and maybe change what kind of services they're looking for?

We started offering, at all eight campuses, face-to-face student wellness and mental health. [Then the] pandemic hits and we had to obviously switch from face-to-face to remote. Well...you had eight people living in a two-bedroom apartment and where's the privacy? You couldn't go anywhere and students needed help more than ever.

When we started slowly opening, we started realizing that students were using our labs as places where they would go to receive telehealth. Because they preferred going to an isolated place to receive mental health therapy online than going face-to-face because of the stigma. You're able to reserve a room for an hour and speak one-on-one and no one knows what you're doing!

So we incorporated both. We have face-to-face at all eight campuses where students are able to receive mental health services. But now we also have the telehealth [through which] we provide virtual mental health services. And what we've realized is that students who wouldn't have attended a session now are in different places on campus.

Something else that we do is we leverage [Single Stop](#) as well. Our students that are receiving our mental health services go through a benefit screening. Because the reason as to why they may be experiencing 'x' is because of 'y'. And as I'm sure you know, the presenting problem may be very different from the real problem, right?

So this benefit screening allows us to connect students with a myriad of support resources that they may not even know that we have available. Childcare, housing, help with utilities, anything

and everything. Legal service, legal advice, emergency funds as well. So it's really those wrap-around services that they may not even know we have as an institution.

"I think the new generation is embracing mental health and student wellness in ways that my generation never did and I think that we're headed in the right direction."

How long will these contracts with the telehealth providers last? Are they grant-funded through COVID-19 emergency funds or is this a permanent expansion in services?

No, this is a permanent expansion at the institution. We believe in student health and mental wellness. It's not going away, right? When we look at the national movement, that stigma really is decreasing I think across cultures. But also the need for students saying, "Hey Jaime, is there something available?"

I think the new generation is embracing mental health and student wellness in ways that my generation never did and I think that we're headed in the right direction. But I think the pandemic definitely did put the 'x' on the floor and said, it's ok not to be ok.

If you or someone you know may be considering suicide, contact the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) by dialing 9-8-8, or the [Crisis Text Line](#) by texting HOME to 741741.

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