

## Executive Insight



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We know the staggering statistics: one in four American adults suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. The pandemic has only accelerated the crisis. More than 100,000

Americans overdosed last year, a new record. Last fall, leading experts declared the mental health crisis in children a national emergency.

Hackensack Meridian Health CEO Robert Garrett breaks down how the largest health system in New Jersey is expanding access and innovating care.

### What are the leading strategies Hackensack Meridian Health is executing to provide more behavioral healthcare?

**RG:** Strategic partnerships are key to advancing our mission to transform healthcare and this is especially true in behavioral health. Our merger with Carrier Clinic, one of the largest behavioral health organizations in the region, is helping us expand access, better coordinate care, and innovate treatment.

We have dramatically increased access through a rapid expansion of telehealth, which now accounts for about 60 percent of behavioral health visits. Access to behavioral health specialists remains critical to our emergent patients. We are currently offering telepsychiatry services remotely, and will soon be offering this service 24/7 across our network with additional full-time psychiatrists.

We invested \$35 million in a central New Jersey hospital campus to consolidate inpatient behavioral health units to provide a new state-of-the-art suite modeled after Carrier Clinic. At the same location, a behavioral health command center will be instituted, serving as the hub for hospitals and clinics, offering urgent consultants and scheduled telehealth visits.

Finally, we will be centralizing the process to schedule a behavioral health appointment, giving simple and easy access to our wide-ranging network of providers.

### The need for pediatric behavioral healthcare is even more pressing. Can you explain your approach to expanding access in New Jersey?

**RG:** Sadly, we saw a 90 percent increase in visits to the emergency department in our children's hospitals in the last two years. Once again, partnerships with other health systems and state government are essential for us to address a crisis. Hackensack Meridian Health helped

create the New Jersey Pediatric Psychiatry Collaborative to provide pediatric patients with timely psychiatric care. Services are regionalized through nine statewide hubs, which educate pediatricians on mental healthcare, help them screen for and identify mental health concerns and provide consultations with a psychiatrist. The collaborative, funded by the state and supported by other health systems, has made more than 16,000 referrals and includes more than 630 pediatric providers. The number of consultations provided by psychiatrists increased 40 percent in the last three years. Additionally, we are reaching more Medicaid patients — a 37 percent increase in the last year.

### Hackensack Meridian Health also opened one of the first urgent care behavioral health centers in the nation. Is this model catching on in the community?

**RG:** We saw a need for behavioral health treatment that provides an alternative to the emergency department and opened the new center in 2019. Volume continues to grow. This year we expect to treat more than 1,600 patients. Here's how it works: we renovated an existing urgent care center to include a behavioral health unit. It is staffed by an advanced practice nurse, a licensed clinical social worker, and a psychiatrist who can be reached via telehealth. Appointments aren't required and we added evening, weekend, and holiday hours for more convenient and timely care. In the event a patient has a life-threatening emergency, the center is located next to one of our three academic medical centers. Roughly 85 percent of patient diagnoses are for anxiety.

### Tell us about the network's long-term plans to expand access to care, especially to treat pediatric patients and those struggling with substance abuse.

**RG:** We will continue to develop our destination addiction treatment center in northern New Jersey, which has provided more than 1,000 visits for outpatient therapy. The next phase, a 48-bed inpatient center, is expected to open in early 2024.

We are also planning to add 40 pediatric beds to Carrier Clinic, growth supported through a \$10 million state grant. Additionally, the network is doubling the size of its psychiatric residency program to 56 slots and we are adding 12 fellowships in child psychiatry. We will continue to adapt and innovate to meet our patients' needs.

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