

Feeling suicidal, she turned to her college. But it had just cut campus mental health services.

PA spotlightpa.org/news/2019/11/hacc-community-college-campus-mental-health-suicide/

By Aneri
Pattani

November 12,
2019



ANERI PATTANI / Spotlight PA

Spotlight PA is an independent, nonpartisan newsroom powered by The Inquirer in partnership with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and PennLive/the Patriot-News. [Sign up for our free weekly newsletter.](#)

Stress was mounting for Jennifer Beachtel.

It was September, and she was about a month into her second semester at HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College. She was taking college courses for the first time and juggling care for three children, two of whom have autism.

Life was starting to feel out of control, Beachtel, 33, said in a recent interview. She had dealt with mental illness since she was a kid, and she knew she needed to talk to someone. Late that month, she said, she walked into the counseling office on the college's Gettysburg campus and asked for help.

"I'm really overwhelmed, I'm feeling suicidal, and just really need to talk to somebody," she recalled telling the woman at the front desk.

Beachtel didn't know it at the time, but just a few weeks earlier, HACC — Pennsylvania's largest community college — had instructed counselors to stop providing mental health services. The change, which was not publicly announced to students, was first reported by Spotlight PA.

Beachtel was told that no one was available and that she would have to find a therapist in the community.

"I was devastated," she said. "I should have been able to speak to somebody, at least anybody who could have directed me so I didn't have to go home and feel like that."

More than a month after the college eliminated mental health counseling across its five campuses, there is still confusion about how students can access care. And a Spotlight PA review of the list of resources being given to students found outdated phone numbers and providers with long wait times.

There are also new questions about the timing of the college's decision to eliminate the services. President John Sygielski has offered several explanations for the cut, from a \$2.7 million budget deficit to a lack of students using counseling and increased demand for virtual services or more flexible office hours.

In a Nov. 4 interview, Sygielski conceded the college hadn't actually saved any money from cutting campus mental health counseling because the advisers who provided it will be employed through October 2020 to continue offering academic and career counseling. Their positions will then be eliminated.

The college has yet to finalize any agreements with external providers to offer students low- or no-cost counseling, which is important for those who have limited or no insurance. Asked why services were cut before an agreement was in place, Sygielski said he wanted students to go directly to community providers rather than see an on-campus counselor and then, after a few sessions, be referred off campus.

"What we want to do is make sure we refer students from the get-go, so there's no transition," he said.

In a [previous statement on Oct. 25](#), however, HACC said those situations rarely occurred: "Most clinical mental health counseling needs were handled internally and resolved within one or two visits."

Regardless, students in crisis shouldn't be told to wait, Beachtel said.

"I don't want them to feel like I felt," she said. "I wouldn't wish that on anybody."



Courtesy Jennifer Beachtel

What saved Beachtel was her 17-year-old daughter's encouragement to call a crisis line, she said. The person who answered helped calm her down.

"If I didn't have that, I wouldn't be talking to you right now," she said.

Beachtel later called a therapy provider to schedule an appointment and was told she would have to wait three weeks to see a counselor. She continued to call the crisis line in the weeks before her appointment.

HACC declined to comment on Beachtel's case, but said that the protocol for students who are suicidal is to call campus security and get them help immediately.

"The system that was implemented in September 2019 is working well," the college said in a statement. "While HACC no longer provides clinical mental health counseling, making sure students are still handled with compassion and care is at the core of the college's decision-making."

College mental health experts said eliminating on-campus counseling is risky given the persistent rise in the number of students experiencing depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for that age group, and the demand for campus counseling services has nearly doubled over the past decade.

As part of the change, HACC said students who seek mental health services will be referred to deans of student affairs, who will then refer them to off-campus providers. The deans use a list of 24 community resources across the college's campuses in Harrisburg, York, Lancaster, Gettysburg, and Lebanon.

Sygielski said they either hand students the list of phone numbers with suggestions of particular providers to call first, or in crisis situations make the calls themselves. The college said the list is updated annually. But a review by Spotlight PA found outdated numbers and providers too full to accommodate new clients.

The number listed for True North Wellness in York actually rang the First National Bank in

Palmyra. A listing for Northwest Human Services in Lebanon did not go to a counseling office, but to an administrative center in Hummelstown for Merakey, the name the company has gone by since April 2018.

HACC has since updated both resources after being contacted by Spotlight PA.

Eight of the contacts on the college's referral list were crisis intervention lines, used for people who are at risk of harming themselves or others but typically not for scheduling counseling sessions. Another eight were referral providers, meaning they would give students another list of phone numbers to call to get counseling services.

The remaining eight resources provide actual clinical services such as in-person counseling. Some are specialized, such as YWCA Lancaster, which offers only sexual abuse and trauma counseling, or Pathways Center for Grief and Loss, which offers only bereavement counseling.

Most of the providers said it would take one to two weeks for a student to get an appointment. One said it was booking appointments into December. Only Catholic Charities and WellSpan Philhaven, each with locations across Central Pennsylvania, said they could see a student with any mental health concern within two days.

College health experts said a referral system is most successful when schools regularly update provider contact information and confirm they're able to take new clients. Some colleges pay services like Thriving Campus to help coordinate the referral process, while others hire case managers to assist students.

"You want to have as few impediments or hurdles in the system as you possibly can," said Victor Schwartz, a licensed psychiatrist and chief medical officer of the JED Foundation, which works to prevent youth suicide. "You don't want to send someone to a clinician that says, 'I can see you in eight weeks,' because that's two-thirds of a semester."

Long wait times for counseling are common across the country. The demand for mental health services has increased and there often is a shortage of providers. The strain is especially prominent at low- or no-cost centers for people who can't afford therapy, such as some community college students.

A 2016 report found that 13.5% of community college students nationally were uninsured. Out-of-pocket costs for therapy often run upward of \$80 per hour.

In some cases, taxpayer-funded county programs may pick up the slack after HACC's cuts, covering the cost of care for those who can't afford it.

Dan Eisenhauer, administrator for Dauphin County's mental health, autism, and developmental programs, said he heard about HACC's decision to eliminate campus mental health services through the media. His team then reached out to the college to see how it could help students find community providers.

"This is perhaps a new population for us to serve," Eisenhauer said, "but we'll try to expedite it and get people connected so they can be successful at HACC."

Spotlight PA receives funding from nonprofit institutions and readers like you who are committed to investigative journalism that gets results. Become a Founding Donor today at spotlightpa.org/donate.