

Mental health "dashboard" offers reams of data, clinic comparisons

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The county's behavioral health administrator today rolls out a new public database that compares the area's 25 clinics using near-real-time information in an effort to foster competition and improve performance.

The Magellan Health Services "dashboard" allows consumers and families to see how individual clinics and staff members are faring on 18 indicators, ranging from caseloads to case planning.

"The transparency is pretty amazing," said Dr. Laura Nelson, deputy director for the state health department's Division of Behavioral Health Services. "Naturally, there's a lot of anxiety."

Nelson said providers and employees, initially wary of making their numbers public, have generally embraced the project. She said the state Department of Health Services brought the idea to Magellan last March as a way to improve outcomes for people struggling with mental illness and substance abuse.

The system compiles reams of data into 18 separate "gauges" on the website, indicating with green, yellow and red -- and percentage figures -- how the clinic fares on individual criteria based on standards set by DHS. The clinic pages also offer basic information like hours of operation and location.

Some of the indicators track the same data that's integral to the Arnold vs. Sarn class action lawsuit, which governs behavioral health care in Maricopa County. But Nelson said the new dashboard transcends the court case.

"We have an obligation and a responsibility to manage something much, much larger than that," she said.

A series of critical audits by an independent monitor and nearly a year of delays by Gov. Jan Brewer and health officials have led attorneys for the mentally ill to ask the judge in the case to hire outside experts.

Brewer's attorneys told the judge last spring that the governor would form a task force charged with preparing legislation for the session that begins next month. That hasn't happened, though she has asked Sen. Carolyn Allen to chair such a panel.

Now, the governor is asking that a status hearing, set for Wednesday, be delayed until after the auditor's 2009 report is submitted. That's expected to be late next month.

Plaintiffs' attorneys are arguing against further delays.

"It is imperative that the court start now to address the chronic deficiencies in the mental health system, by directing the monitor to engage expert consultants to recommend necessary reforms," attorney Anne Ronan wrote.

Nelson said she expects the Magellan dashboard to be a model for other regional behavioral health authorities in the state, and adapted nationally. But she's mindful that the statistics, though they show improvement in some areas, also show the system's failures.

"My fear is that this data will be used somehow to say the system is in crisis," Nelson said. "This is not a system in crisis."

David Covington, chief of adult services for Magellan of Arizona, said behavioral health is lagging other disciplines in terms of using outcome statistics to drive improvements.

"This is where the field needs to go," he said. "We've got to find a way to get outcomes at the front of the train."

Clinic comparisons could have limited usefulness for people without computers, without transportation and without the wherewithal to compare the complex data. Even if caseloads or job placement scores higher at another clinic, for example, consumers may not be able to switch.

The site was supposed to go live on Magellan's website by midnight, but wasn't yet operable Monday morning. A [alternate URL](#) was offered in the meantime.