

Vermont is struggling to provide mental health counseling, especially for young people

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Vermont is facing a perfect storm of increased need for mental health counseling, especially among young people, and decreased supply of mental health counselors, according to the deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Health.

Alison Krompf described the situation as a crisis brought on by the pandemic, which plunged people into isolation, and put mental health counselors out of commission as practices shut down. Krompf said that as of August, there were 519 vacant positions for mental health counselors in Vermont.

"We've seen capacity issues due to intense staffing needs," Krompf said.



Mental health counselors at Riverstone Counseling, left to right, Hannah Katz, Neera B.K., Kristen Breault-Bolio, Leslie Ferrer, Nerzada Turan, and Alyx Herbert. *Provided By Riverstone Counseling.*

Krompf said emergent health care needs in Vermont are being met — the most critical cases where a patient's safety is at risk. But it's at the expense of those who fall farther down on the mental health spectrum.

"When you're in a crisis like the pandemic, you unfortunately have to start focusing your resources on safety, which is imminent," Krompf said. "That's what the system has done."

A long waiting list for help

One of the organizations on the frontlines of the mental health crisis in Vermont for young people is [Riverstone Counseling](#), a program of Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington. Most people know [Spectrum](#) for its Sleep Out to raise money for homeless teenagers.

"What they don't know is that's a part of what we actually do," said Mark Redmond, executive director of the nonprofit organization.

After an isolated year: [How a Vermont summer camp supports LGBTQ teens with social anxiety](#)



Mark Redmond, executive director of Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington. *James Buck*

Mental health and addiction counseling for teens and young adults is actually a much bigger part of what Spectrum does, according to Redmond. To deal with the perception problem among the public, Redmond changed the name of the program to Riverstone Counseling.

"We had to do a whole rebranding," he said. "You don't have to be homeless to get counseling."

The demand for mental health counseling in Chittenden County and across Vermont far exceeds the supply of counselors, according to Kristen Breault-Bolio, Riverstone counseling manager. Breault-Bolio said Riverstone has a waiting list of 80 people. The program is hiring as quickly as it can to meet the demand.

Workforce training program: Burlington launches training for nursing assistants to fill "scores" of open positions

Riverstone currently has six full-time counselors and hired two more who started the week of Sept. 27. The program has two contract counselors and three interns.

"The jury is out around what the waitlist will look like after these two hires start, but we are hopeful it will decrease it," Breault-Bolio said.

Hannah Katz and Alyx Herbert are two of Riverstone's mental health counselors. The program offers outpatient counseling only, usually seeing clients at least once a week. Each counselor aims to book 25 appointments weekly.

As home prices go up: Vermont commits \$53.8 million to create housing for homeless



Riverstone counselor Alyx Herbert, as seen on Sept. 20, 2021. *DAN D'AMBROSIO/FREE PRESS*

Katz said the mental health crisis brought on by the pandemic, among teens at least, comes largely from being cut off from school.

"For young people especially the most important relationships in their lives are typically friends," Katz said. "People were isolated, not able to go to school, not able to do their extracurriculars, stuck at home. COVID presented a crisis because of all the good things that were taken away."

Social media helps de-stigmatize mental health care

On the plus side, Katz, 30, said mental health counseling no longer carries the stigma it suffered even when she was a teenager.

"I feel like it's everywhere, maybe because I pay attention, but it just feels like everyone is talking about mental health all the time, everywhere," Katz said. "That wasn't the case even for myself, and certainly not for my parents and grandparents."

Drug overdoses: While ER visits were down last year, drug overdoses increased amid pandemic



Riverstone counselor Hannah Katz, as seen on Sept. 20, 2021. *DAN D'AMBROSIO/FREE PRESS*

Katz credits social media and celebrities for the change.

"When people see, 'Oh this person is also anxious, this person also experiences depression,' it normalizes it," Katz said. "Because people connect so vastly on social media I think that can validate mental health counseling. I'm not alone in this."

Herbert said their clients come in with different levels of insight of what's going on with them.

Referrals for Riverstone skyrocket

Riverstone was already on a growth trajectory before COVID hit, according to Herbert, but things accelerated as a result of the pandemic.

"The referrals coming in did really skyrocket," they said.



Riverstone Counseling is trying to keep up with the demand for mental health counseling. *DAN D'AMBROSIO/FREE PRESS*

Riverstone gets referrals from a variety of sources, including schools, doctors' offices and organizations such as Planned Parenthood.

An analysis by Riverstone showed that even with the increase in full-time counselors — from 2.5 in 2017 to 6 in 2021 — the growth in demand resulted in an increase of 123% in the waiting time from screening to admission and therapy, from 30 to 67 days.

Riverstone found that as of Aug. 30, 72% of its clients had been waiting for four or more weeks for their first counseling appointment; 12 percent had been waiting more than 13 weeks to be seen; 27% had been waiting for 9 to 13 weeks; and 33% had been waiting for 4 to 8 weeks.

"It's not good to have a waiting list when someone is suffering," Redmond said.

Alcoholism: Rates likely increased during the pandemic, but fewer people got help

Private insurers need to step up

One of the biggest issues with mental health counseling is the reluctance of private insurance providers to pay for it, according to Deputy Commissioner Krompf. Medicaid, on the other hand, fully pays for counseling and doesn't limit the number of visits. Many of Spectrum's clients are covered by Medicaid.

"If private insurance was like Medicaid we'd be in better shape," Krompf said. "We really need private insurance to come to the table more. In some pockets they are, but progress has been slow. It's putting a lot on the back of Medicaid and state tax dollars to cover what private insurance doesn't cover."



Riverstone Counseling is a program of Spectrum Youth & Family Services in Burlington. *BRENT HALLENBECK/FREE PRESS*

Spectrum offers a sliding scale of fees, based on income, for clients who have to pay out of pocket. The program also has access to a couple of grants that can be used to pay for the counseling of clients who qualify.

"We don't want ability to pay to get in the way," Herbert said.

The "success" of Riverstone Counseling presents a dilemma for everyone involved in the program. Redmond and his staff are grateful that they're able to do their part to address Vermont's mental health crisis, but they're also sad that the need is so great. Riverstone's counselors find themselves conflicted.

"We're always trying to work ourselves out of a job," Herbert said.

Unfortunately, Krompf foresees even higher demand for mental health counseling as people who were afraid to seek help because of the pandemic begin to emerge from self-imposed quarantines.

"I'm expecting a spike down the road," Krompf said. "Our goal was to bring more mental health counselors to Vermont to help all mental health agencies staff up. We've not been able to do that."

If you need help

Riverstone Counseling - If you are in crisis and are not a Spectrum client, please call First Call at the Howard Center at (802) 488-7777. If you are already a client, call Riverstone at (802) 864-7423 x310 during business hours, or (802) 350-6748 after 4:30 p.m.

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