

Ensuring the Patient's Voice is Heard on Mental Health

Finding Collaborative Solutions Through Input from Diverse Group

By Matt Skryja

As part of the Kaiser Permanente Regional Behavioral Health Patient Advisory Council, Elaine Peng and other members have brainstormed about ways to break barriers to mental health care and increase access. That included addressing the needs of a diverse community, where the stigma of mental illness can be freighted with cultural and language barriers.

"I am particularly happy to be giving a voice to the Chinese community," said Peng. "As part of the council, I'm proud to have worked on getting educational materials in more languages so that additional communities will have better access to the information they need. It's rewarding."

Peng is part of the Patient Advisory Council established by Kaiser Permanente in 2014 to provide a forum that empowers mental health patients and their families to speak out about ways of improving behavioral health services, member safety, and share their care experience and perspectives with therapists and professionals.

The council includes patient and family member volunteers who collaborate with health care professionals to make sure that the member voice is integrated in the delivery of mental health care through planning, therapist choice and relationship, access to care and overall quality.

"Kaiser Permanente's continuous quality improvement culture acknowledges and highly values input from patients and members," said Dr. Yener Balan, Executive Director of Behavioral Health, Kaiser Permanente Northern California. "To ensure the best possible care for our patients, we seek and welcome experiential stories and strive to be honest and transparent."

The Patient Advisory council is made up of seven patient volunteers, two physician leaders, and an administrator. Members of the council provide input on the mental health services they would like to see offered and suggest how those services should be designed.

"As a member of the council, I feel like an integral part of the decision-making process. I feel that others listen and this is validated on the feedback we've gotten from various departments," said Gail Miller, a patient advisor on the council. "I am a conduit for other patients to bring forth issues and ideas and I like it because you see how our work is slowly but surely making a difference."

Miller, Peng and other council members have provided valuable feedback and insights that have influenced care improvements in:

- First appointment questionnaires
- Care experience in the Emergency Department
- Call center processes
- Leveraging community advocacy in providing care
- Anti-stigma campaign for employees and members

For Peng, the council forum provides a safe place for open discussions about mental health, offering patient perspective on improving care delivery.

“There are no right or wrong answers. We feel free to share our opinions,” she said. “I am empowered to help make a positive difference for all mental health patients at Kaiser Permanente.”

The patient’s perspective is important in finding collaborative solutions, and delivering the best care for patients, said Stuart Buttlair, MD, chair of the regional council.

“We really want to bring the patient’s voice into mental health care, hearing their experiences and what makes sense to them – what they think is successful care, what is a good outcome,” said Buttlair, chair of the Regional Behavioral Health Patient Advisory Council.

This year, the council focused on a co-design project exploring ways of addressing, and breaking, barriers to mental health care in our communities, through human centered design approaches.

“We volunteer for the council because we want to better the lives of people living with mental illness,” said Miller. “As an African- American, I like to help battle stigmas that the community has when it comes to distrusting people who don’t look like them who are delivering mental health services. My experience on the council has been hugely impactful.”

The council meets at least eight times a year, and volunteers serve two-year terms. Patients and their family members who would like to be considered as volunteer members of the Regional Behavioral Health Patient Advisory Council should reach out to their doctor and ask that their name be submitted.

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