

Considerations for the Care and Treatment of Mental and Substance Use Disorders in the COVID-19 Epidemic: March 20, 2020

Overview: COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus spread by the respiratory route and contact with contaminated surfaces. It appears to be highly contagious and has a significant morbidity and mortality rate. Because these attributes are known and because this agent has been identified as responsible for a global pandemic, it is essential that behavioral healthcare facilities implement plans to protect patients and staff from infection to the greatest extent possible. The following are offered as considerations aimed at decreasing the likelihood of infection and viral transmission and providing for the behavioral health needs of patients.

There are many options for treating mental and substance use disorders which have an evidence base and/or are best practices. These include both inpatient and outpatient options. Because of the substantial risk of coronavirus spread with congregation of individuals in a limited space such as in an inpatient or residential facility, SAMHSA is advising that outpatient treatment options be used to the greatest extent possible. Inpatient facilities should be reserved for those for whom outpatient measures are not considered an adequate clinical option; i.e.: for those with mental disorders that are life-threatening, (e.g.: the severely depressed suicidal person). For those with substance use disorders, inpatient/residential treatment has not been shown to be superior to intensive outpatient treatment. Therefore, in these extraordinary times of risk of viral infection, it is recommended that intensive outpatient treatment services be utilized whenever possible.

CDC has released guidance on the expanded use of telehealth services. SAMHSA strongly recommends the use of telehealth and/or telephonic services to provide evaluation and treatment of patients. These resources can be used for initial evaluations including evaluations for consideration of the use of buprenorphine products to treat opioid use disorder. Further, these resources can be used to implement individual or group therapies such as evidence-based interventions including cognitive behavioral therapy for mental and/or substance use disorders.

For inpatient/residential programs that plan to remain open during the current COVID-19 related emergency; care should be taken to consider CDC guidance on precautions in admitting new patients, management of current residents who may have been exposed to or who are infected with COVID-19, and visitor policies.