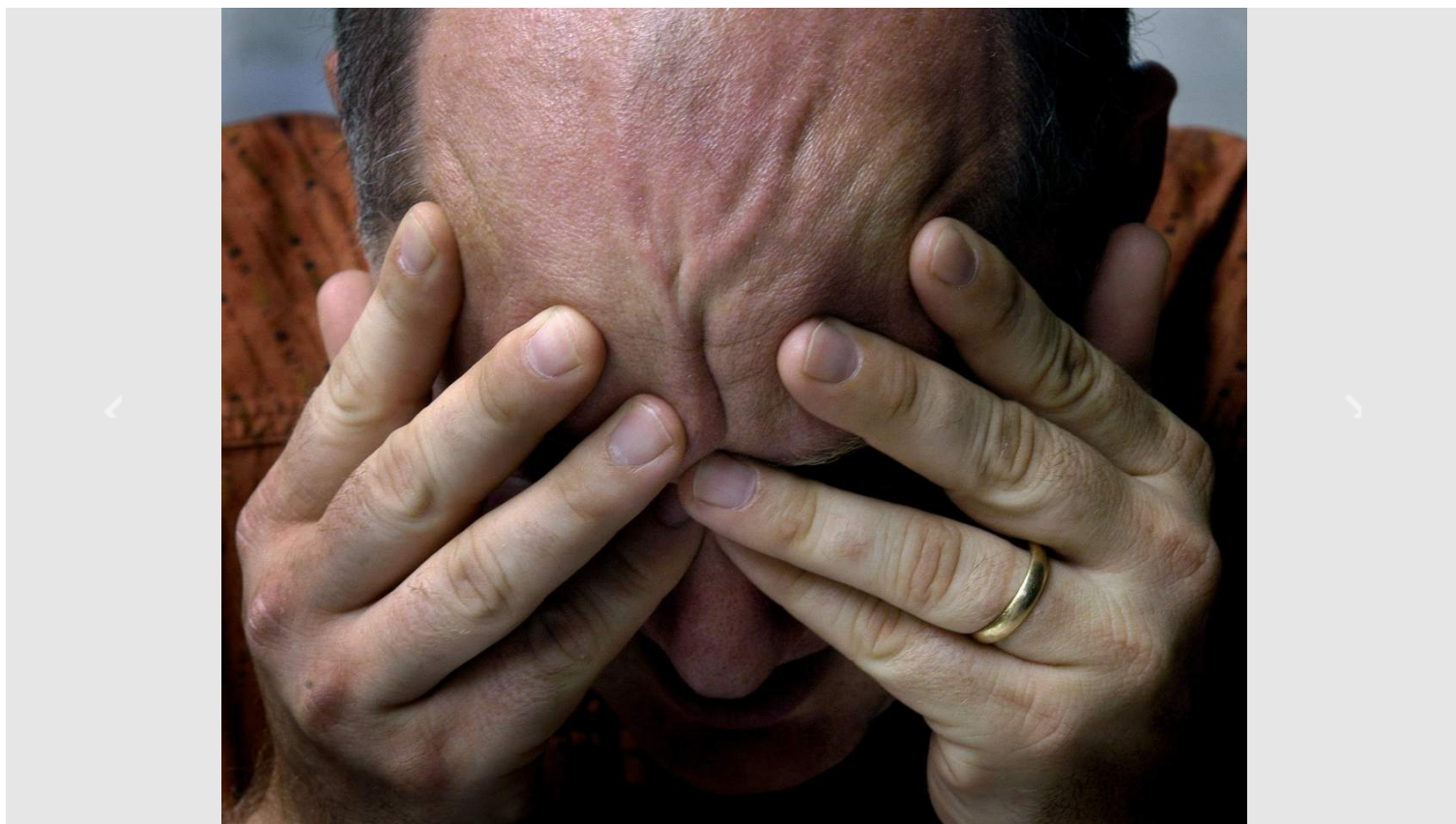


Florida ranks 43rd in access to mental health care. A new group in Tampa Bay wants to change that.

## Florida ranks 43rd in access to mental health care. A new group in Tampa Bay wants to change that.

Leaders from hospitals, businesses, law enforcement, government and education have formed a coalition to improve mental health care. One idea: "behavioral health urgent care."



One in six people in Tampa Bay suffer from depression, and one in 12 struggle with substance abuse, according to the BayCare health care system. Suicide attempts and overdoses are up, causing a shortage of mental health providers. A coalition of hospitals and other groups wants to fix the problem. [TIMES (2004)]



By [Justine Griffin](#)

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As substance abuse and suicide rates continue to climb across Tampa Bay, a group of local hospital executives is hoping a new community partnership can help reverse the trend.

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The West Central Florida Mental Wellness Coalition launched a few weeks ago with a big mission in mind: to solve the region's ongoing mental health crisis by making care more widely available and erasing longstanding stigma.

The idea for the organization came from Tommy Inzina, CEO of BayCare, the local health care system with 15 hospitals and other facilities across the region. But the initiative has grown to include executives from nearly every major hospital system in the region, plus local politicians and leaders from law enforcement agencies, school districts, nonprofits and businesses.

“We want to tackle the issue, which reaches much farther than just hospitals,” Inzina said. “Law enforcement, school districts and more and more people are dealing with this issue. But we often work in silos.”

One in six people who live in the Tampa Bay area suffer from depression, and one out of every 12 struggle with substance abuse disorder, according to BayCare. Suicide attempts in the region jumped by 14 percent from 2016 to 2017, according to records on hospital stays and emergency room visits. Overdoses increased by 25 percent over the same period.

At the same time, Tampa Bay is seeing a shortage of mental health providers.

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“Florida is ranked 43rd in the nation for access to behavioral health care,” said Dr. Ravi Chari, president of HCA’s West Florida Division, which owns and operates hospitals including Largo Medical Center and the Medical Center of Trinity. “A lot of what we plan to do is to raise awareness of the resources in our community. For example, the 211 hotline is something we don’t think enough people know about.”

Chari was referring to the nationwide phone number created by the Federal Communications Commission nearly 20 years ago to connect people to a wide range of social services, including mental health care. In Hillsborough County, for instance, the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay operates a call center that answers all 211 calls made in the county, in addition to offering counseling and ambulatory services.

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Inzina felt an independent nonprofit with support across many community groups was necessary in order for the new effort to be successful. So the coalition was born with the goal of acting as a “convener,” bringing together key leaders and stakeholders to come up with solutions.

The group aims to advocate for local, state and federal policies that will create better access to mental health and substance abuse care. It also hopes to provide grants for local initiatives and connect people with the right resources in their communities.

One issue the coalition plans to tackle is keeping people with mental health or substance abuse problems out of jails and emergency rooms where they’re not always getting the most appropriate care. Inzina mentioned the idea of creating a “behavioral health urgent care” option, which could mean employing mental health professionals in existing urgent care centers or making mental health providers available via telehealth, like on existing health care apps.

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“While we don't have the right answer yet, we plan to explore more urgent intervention solutions like these,” Inzina said.

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The new coalition hopes to raise up to \$10 million to cover operating costs for the first five years. It will hire an executive director to lead the initiative, and a handful of staff members.

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So far, the coalition has raised \$5 million toward its goal, which includes financial contributions from AdventHealth, Florida Blue, HCA, Tampa General Hospital, the Clearwater Police Department, McKinsey & Co., and other local businesses. BayCare, which operates Morton Plant and St. Anthony's hospitals among others, matched every contribution.

“Our biggest challenge may be to end the stigma” that comes with mental health issues, Chari said. “That's the bigger picture problem.”

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