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API offers Alaska primary care providers free youth medication consultation

Toll-free access to best-practices information from specialist at Seattle Children's Hospital

ANCHORAGE, AK — Beginning Feb. 28, 2011, Alaska primary care providers who prescribe medication for youth with severe behavioral health disorders have access to free support from a child and adolescent psychiatrist via a toll-free number. The program aims to improve quality and efficiency of care and access to services.

The service addresses difficulty in accessing youth psychiatrists due to a nationwide shortage. Primary care providers prescribe most psychiatric medications to youth, and few have access to formal psychiatric consultation programs.

Now, providers statewide can call the Alaska Partnership Access Line (A-PAL) — 1-855-345-2725 — to consult on youth medication management with a specialist at Seattle Children's Hospital three times per week: Monday and Wednesday at 5 p.m. and Friday at 8 a.m.

“A-PAL allows primary care providers to offer their young patients specialized care,” Alaska Psychiatric Institute CEO Ron Adler said. “We’re excited to bring this concept to Alaska. This service furthers our goals of caring for our youth in Alaska, and integrating primary care and behavioral health care.”

A-PAL is based on similar programs in Washington and Massachusetts. A November 2010 article in the scientific journal published by the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that more than 90 percent of primary care clinicians using the Massachusetts program found it helpful. The article said the rate of users who reported that they are usually able to meet the needs of psychiatric patients increased eight-fold, to 63 percent from 8 percent.

Just as a primary care physician with a patient fresh from heart surgery will consult with a cardiologist, A-PAL will primarily serve primary care practitioners with patients leaving

emergency psychiatric care. With consultation, kids are more likely to be matched with the best medication right away, preventing waste of expensive medications and reducing the risk of another mental health emergency. Also, the quicker patients are linked with effective care, the sooner providers can see other patients.

Such consultation services have long been popular in the private sector as a way to increase access and reduce cost by boosting efficiency, and interest is now spreading among states. Alaska is the third state to implement the concept.

The service is funded by the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority through the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Division of Behavioral Health's Alaska Psychiatric Institute.

A-PAL's technical assistance on medication best practices is one of several Bring the Kids Home strategies to care for youth as close to their home community as possible. Bring the Kids Home has reduced admissions to out-of-state residential psychiatric treatment centers by 88 percent — from 752 to 90 youth — between fiscal years 2004 and 2010.

For more information on A-PAL and other telemedicine programs through Alaska Psychiatric Institute, please visit <http://hss.state.ak.us/dbh/API/telepsychiatry.htm>.