



Accomplishments of 2017 lay groundwork for ongoing innovation in 2018

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

As one of Georgia's 26 Community Service Boards (CSBs), Highland Rivers Health is designated by the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to provide treatment services for mental health, substance abuse and intellectual and developmental disabilities in a 12-county region of northwest Georgia. It is extremely important work.

Highland Rivers is one of the largest CSBs in Georgia; we have an annual budget of approximately \$48 million, more than 650 employees and service area that includes nearly 1 million Georgians. Highland Rivers is a public agency – similar to a public health department but for mental health – that is a critical part of the state's behavioral health safety net.

As a safety net provider, Highland Rivers serves individuals who might not otherwise be able to access mental health, substance abuse or disability services because they are uninsured, have Medicaid or simply can't afford to see a private provider. We take this role very seriously.

Despite ongoing funding challenges, Highland Rivers has accomplished a great deal to positively impact the communities and individuals we serve. As we begin 2018, I would like to take a moment to discuss the many positive accomplishments we achieved at Highland Rivers Health over the past year.

In 2017, Highland Rivers opened three Home Again programs, which support families in crisis in an effort to reduce the need for out-of-home care for youth, whether that be through hospitalization or entry into foster care. Highland Rivers is the only CSB in Georgia to offer Home Again.

Another quickly growing program is APEX, a school-based behavioral health program in which Highland Rivers staff work in schools with teachers and counselors to identify and refer children with behavioral health issues. We have expanded the program to 20 schools across our service area and are in discussion with additional counties about expanding further.

Over the past four years, Highland Rivers has grown our services to veterans by more than 1000 percent. In addition to holding a contract with the VA, we have expanded our services through two veteran accountability courts in our service area. We are also providing mental health services in two jails – in Gilmer and Paulding counties – and working to expand these services into other counties as well.

In our adult mental health program, we hired six licensed clinicians, five nurse practitioners and three RNs to help increase our capacity. We extended hours so that every clinic is open until 7:00 p.m. at least one night a week. Highland Rivers also secured contracts in every county for

prescription assistance so individuals we serve can get financial support and timely access to medications.

Highland Rivers' Supported Employment program, which helps individuals living in recovery find jobs, now has a total of 79 supported employment slots. In our residential programs, we assisted almost 100 individuals in finding supportive housing last year.

In our Crisis services, Highland Rivers received an overall score of 96 percent from state reviewers, and a score of 100 percent in focused outcomes and service guidelines. In the past year we expanded our crisis staff to include night-shift nurse coordinators at all three of our crisis stabilization units to increase support and supervision around the clock.

Finally, one of our most exciting projects is the partnership with Redmond Regional Medical Center, in which Highland Rivers provides behavioral health assessments in the emergency department. By working together, we have been able to divert 47 percent of individuals seen from costly inpatient beds to more appropriate outpatient services.

Although much of Highland Rivers' work might seem to take place out of the public eye, we are working every day to ensure that everyone in the communities we serve has access to affordable, high quality behavioral health services. We look forward to continuing our innovation in 2018 and beyond.