



Assertive community treatment helps individuals with severe mental illness live independently in their community

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

As a licensed professional counselor that has worked in the mental health field for more than 30 years, I can tell you that ‘mental illness’ is not a single condition. There are a variety of mental illnesses that can cause a range of symptoms. In some cases, mental illness may be temporary – for example, grief-related depression – and does not require complex or long-term treatments in order to recover.

However, other types of mental illness – such a severe bipolar disorder or schizophrenia - can be highly-complex chronic conditions that can affect individuals throughout their lives and require equally complex treatments. In some cases, these illnesses can cause cognitive and functional impairments.

As recently as a generation ago – and for hundreds of years before – individuals with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI) were committed, confined or otherwise institutionalized in state mental hospitals or asylums. But throughout the 20th century, as our understanding of mental illness and especially medication, therapy and other treatments increased, it became apparent that individuals with SPMI were capable of living outside institutions.

Today, the vast majority of individuals with SPMI live in their community rather than a hospital. In Georgia, when the state closed its psychiatric hospitals – including Northwest Georgia Regional Hospital in Rome – services for individuals with SPMI became the responsibility of Georgia’s 26 community services boards, state-designated mental health agencies such as Highland Rivers Health.

I don’t usually spend many words tooting our own horn, but I feel it is important that members of the communities we serve understand some of the more complex work we do – work that might seem to go on behind the scenes, and certainly outside our more visible outpatient clinics. Toward that end, one program I’d like to highlight is called assertive community treatment, or ACT.

ACT is an intensive community-based program – meaning it provides a variety of services individualized to a person’s specific needs, and those services are delivered in the community (i.e., usually in the person’s home). ACT is one of the oldest and most widely researched evidence-based treatment practices and is targeted specifically to individuals with SPMI who are most at-risk of psychiatric crisis, hospitalization and/or involvement in the criminal justice system.

ACT services are provided by a multidisciplinary team of mental health professionals. For example, Highland Rivers' ACT team includes a psychiatrist, a licensed clinician/therapist, a substance abuse counselor, a certified peer specialist and a paraprofessional. All team members provide services to each individual, and a member of the team is available any time day or night (weekends and holidays too).

Depending on the specific needs of the person receiving ACT services, a team member may visit him or her at home every day. The ACT team helps individuals with SPMI learn to manage medication and symptoms, to manage household items and hygiene (if necessary), to find other resources (for example, for food, utilities, housing) and much more. The ACT team can also help an individual find appropriate employment if he or she wants and is able to work, or to secure disability insurance if not.

In short, assertive community treatment helps individuals with severe chronic mental illness live as independently as possible in their community – the definition of living in recovery. ACT services also help reduce the risk of individuals with SPMI experiencing psychiatric crisis and ending up in the hospital, jail or other institution. It is intense, complex work – and it goes on every day in the communities served by Highland Rivers and the state's other CSBs.

For more information about ACT and other intensive community-based services, visit <http://highlanddrivershealth.com/mental-health-services>.