



Governor, lawmakers support critical behavioral health services in 2019 budget

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

Highland Rivers Health provides behavioral health services across a very large area of northwest Georgia, extending from the Tennessee state line all the way to the edge of metro Atlanta and encompassing approximately 4,400 square miles.

Our service area covers 12 counties (Bartow, Cherokee, Fanning, Floyd, Gilmer, Gordon, Haralson, Murray, Paulding, Pickens, Polk and Whitfield) and includes numerous communities – Woodstock, Cartersville, Jasper, Rome, Blue Ridge, Dallas, Dalton, Ellijay and Calhoun among them.

While few of the nearly 1 million people living in these counties may recognize the size of our service area, many are familiar with our presence in their community – whether an outpatient clinic, crisis unit, teen clubhouse, day program – and that’s what is most important. As a safety-net provider serving the most vulnerable residents, the need for our services is substantial.

Toward that end, Highland Rivers Health is a vocal advocate for funding in the Georgia General Assembly, which allocates funding to the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), the state agency that oversees Community Service Boards such as Highland Rivers.

Each year, we meet with members of our legislative delegation – those state lawmakers representing counties served by Highland Rivers – to keep them informed about the services we provide in their communities and the critical need to maintain, or increase, funding.

Although state lawmakers work to help the communities they represent, their work can impact everyone in Georgia. This is certainly true for mental health and substance use services, and services for individuals with disabilities.

During the 2018 General Assembly, those issues were all priorities. Governor Deal worked with lawmakers to craft a state budget for 2019 that provides – and in many cases increases – funding for mental health, substance use treatment and disability services.

This budget supports several recommendations of the Commission on Children’s Mental Health (co-chaired by DBHDD Commissioner Judy Fitzgerald and Katie Childers, the governor’s deputy chief of staff) with \$10.3 million for child and adolescent crisis services, \$4.3 million to expand Georgia APEX school-based services to 100 more schools, and \$1.1 million to expand

24/7 staffing for the Georgia Crisis Access Line – with an additional \$1.4 million to establish and connect a mobile application to provide mental health crisis services to it.

In addition, there is \$4 million for substance abuse recovery programs through community services boards (such as Highland Rivers) to help address the opioid epidemic in Georgia, \$2.2 million to improve mental health outcomes for children in foster care (the number of children in foster care in Georgia now totals more than 14,000), and \$1.53 million for supported employment and education assistance for 500 young adults with disabilities.

Finally, there is \$1.6 million for student mental health awareness training, including response and intervention training to schools and communities for students in preschool through grade 12.

While the above summary represents key areas of interest for Highland Rivers Health, there are many more programs and services related to mental health, substance use and disabilities that funded across multiple agencies that will help thousands of Georgians.

Highland Rivers wants to extend our gratitude to members of our legislative delegation that have met with us, listened to our concerns, supported behavioral health services in Georgia, and supported the 2019 budget.

In the House of Representatives we thank Kimberly Alexander, Mandi Ballinger, Paul Battles, Michael Caldwell, Wes Cantrell, Kevin Cooke, Christian Coomer, Kasey Carpenter, Katie Dempsey, Rick Jasperse, Trey Kelley, Eddie Lumsden, Howard Maxwell, John Meadows, Paulette Rakestraw, Speaker David Ralston, Jason Ridley, Steve Tarvin and Scot Turner.

In the Georgia Senate, we thank Brandon Beach, Mike Dugan, Steve Gooch, Bill Heath, Chuck Hufstetler, Chuck Payne and Bruce Thompson.

Your support will help Highland Rivers continue to provide critical mental health, substance abuse and disability treatment and recovery services to the most vulnerable Georgians.