



Fort Bend County Podcasts

Podcast Episode 38- Mental Health Awareness

May 7, 2025

Gina: Welcome to this week's Benefit Detective Podcast. I'm Gina!

Wendy: And I'm Wendy...**doorbell** Today, we have Doctor Connie Almeida, Director of Fort Bend County Behavioral Health Department. Welcome!

Dr. Almeida: Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Wendy: Dr. Almeida, can you tell us more about your department and what Behavioral Health offers?

Dr. Almeida: Oh, definitely! And I'm so excited to be here because May is Mental Health Awareness Month and actually today, May 7, is actually, Children's Mental Health Awareness. So, it's a special day to, recognize the importance of mental health among our children, to provide, you know, the supports that they need for healthy, development including their mental health. So, it's, just wanted to make a shout out and, for children's mental health day.

Gina: Yes. I like that.

Dr. Almeida: Okay. Back to the question. Like, what do we do? So Behavioral Health Services is actually a very unique department in Fort Bend County. It was actually started in 2010 by the council of judges. And really with this attention to we have all these individuals with mental health needs in our criminal justice system. What can we do?

And it really was just me, actually part time me, and, started the department and worked very closely with the judiciary and our justice partners and alongside them to really think about, you know, what are the needs and what kinds of supports and services do we provide. And it's been an amazing journey. In 2018, we actually had grown so much that we actually moved under Commissioner's Court, and our role has expanded since then. But so, a little bit about the department. So, as I mentioned, we really started with this focus on how do we support our justice partners? How do we support the Sheriff's Office, law enforcement, the courts? So, a lot of the work that we do actually focuses on identifying people with mental illness in our criminal justice system and providing services. Probably the largest division of Behavioral Health Services is actually our forensic division, and I don't think people realize that. So, we do all the well, not all that. We do most of the court ordered evaluations, which include the competency to stand trial, sanity evaluation. So, whether, somebody is competent to stand trial, whether there's a sanity defense that's involved in looking at that. We do bond conditions evaluations. We do psychological evaluations. Mostly with adults. We do some juvenile, but the majority of our work is adult focus. So that is a big piece of what we do.

Gina: Oh, wow. That's interesting.



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Dr. Almeida: Along the same lines is then we provide services to the courts that focus on, recovery. So, therapy, counseling, parent child work, parent child relationship works.

It's really fascinating because we actually work with children that are as young as like six months because we get referrals from our CPS courts, which is actually how Behavioral Health Services started. In 2005, I had the opportunity to work with Judge Pope, who was one of our Family Court judges. So, we had one of the very first courts in the country which was a specialty courts for babies, birth to three year olds that were coming into CPS. So, we have been doing this work around like parents and children and, you know, and I had just, prior to that, I was the Clinical Director for Texana. So had worked in that system with individuals with mental illness and IDD for many years.

And it's my first time working with judges, and it's been, it's been a wonderful experience. But, so I so back to kind of what we do, Behavioral Health Services focuses on "Five R's." So, it's about, building Resiliency in individuals. So how do we support families, individuals to make them stronger? Recovery and that can be recovery from an addiction, recovery from mental illness.

We also work, of course, with Emergency Management and just, you know, when there's a natural disaster, how can we help? Usually, supporting our first responders or how can we go in and help? Reintegration. A lot of focus on, "how do we get people out of jail into the community." Reunification and, Reducing Recidivism, like, from the beginning.

Keeping people out of jail, you know, making sure that they have the supports not to get back into jail. I think one of the most I think everybody knows about this. One of the most exciting initiatives Sheriff's Office and we're and, we're able to leverage some federal funding to start the Crisis Intervention Team. And so, it was alongside, you know, the Sheriff's Office that we built that Crisis Intervention Team. And Behavioral Health Services was instrumental in coming up with the protocols and also the funding for the Crisis Intervention Team.

And then we were able to demonstrate the value of, you know, the value of the Crisis Intervention Team in terms of public safety and keeping people out of the jail. And then it's now grown and supported by Commissioner's Court.

Gina: Wow! That is so interesting.

Dr. Almeida: Thank you. I think I mean, we're very unique. Our, you know, we focus on this intersection between criminal justice and behavioral health. Yeah. But then we also are always looking at, you know, how do we how do we create a safer community? Like, how do we prevent people from coming into the system? Like, so always looking at services and systems and data.

Gina: Yeah.

Dr. Almeida: I'm really focused a lot on data and partnerships and data decision making and..

Gina: I love that proactive.



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Dr. Almeida: I think it's critical.

Gina: I love that. That's awesome.

Dr. Almeida: Oh! and so I have to talk about, our most recent program. Well, we have two. One is our First Responder Wellness Program. So, we are so fortunate. We have Kayla Ellwood who, was with Patrol with the Sheriff's Office for thirteen years, and then she did her internship with us. And now she actually is a clinician with Behavioral Health Services. But she is really, taking the lead in developing this First Responder Wellness Program, because the majority of the county employees are actually first responders. And, we recognize the impact that work has on them and their families. So, I really believe this. If you wanna take care of the community, you need to take care of the people that are responding to those situations.

So, we are so fortunate and we're constantly looking at how we can expand that program, but, very unique and, really a great service. And the other one that's also recent is, we we've been able to get several federal grants. We currently have a grant called, "Always Parenting," which is actually funded through the Department of Justice. And that program actually focuses on parents that are incarcerated with minor children as well as the caregivers that are taking care of the children in the community. Because often, the incarceration of a parent well, the incarceration of a parent, negatively impacts the the children in the family financially, emotionally, so many additional stressors.

So, what we're trying to do is kind of provide them with supports and services to kind of mitigate, to reduce those stressors, but also then to, support that well-being. So, there's a variety of reasons to for doing that in addition to the children's mental health in the family and so that the family stays stable. But also, there's a lot of research that shows that if there's family support when the individual gets out of jail, they're much more likely to be successful and avoid recidivism. So, it kind of all ties back to that.

Gina: I love that.

Dr. Almeida: Five R's.

Gina: I love that. That's awesome. Well, that wraps up part one of this week's Benefit Detective Podcast with Dr. Almeida with the Fort Bend County Behavioral Health Department. I'm Gina.

Wendy: And I'm Wendy. And stay tuned to part two on Mental Health Awareness.

Gina: And remember, the Benefit Detectives are here to help!