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Ohio CareLine Celebrates One Year of Bringing Hope, Health and Healing to Ohioans Grappling with Mental Health and Substance Use Issues

(COLUMBUS, OH) – The Ohio CareLine (**1.800.720.9616**) reached an important milestone this month – one year of connecting Ohioans struggling with pandemic-related anxiety, depression and stress with trained support professionals who listen and refer Ohioans to local behavioral health resources and services. The toll-free, emotional support service made its debut in April 2020 as state officials ramped up efforts to help mitigate community spread of COVID-19. Since then, counselors have fielded nearly 6,100 calls from all 88 Ohio counties.

“Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic effectively requires us to address all issues the pandemic creates,” said Governor Mike DeWine. “That means working to keep people healthy and well both physically and mentally. The Ohio CareLine’s innovative approach helps meet the unique mental health needs of individuals while keeping them safe.”

“As many Ohioans struggled to come to terms with the ‘new normal’ ushered in by the global pandemic, the Ohio CareLine emerged as an important safety net that brought hope, health and healing to thousands,” said Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) Director Lori Criss. “When we launched this service, we wanted to remind Ohioans that it’s OK to not be OK, and that help was just a phone call away.”

The CareLine provided an immediate service to Ohioans, fielding nearly 1,000 calls in the first month. Since then, thousands more Ohioans have used the service to seek help, information and referrals to local mental health and addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery support care for self or a loved one. CareLine staff are trained to help de-escalate callers experiencing a crisis, provide brief intervention services, and when necessary, refer individuals to community providers for follow-up care.

The reasons for calls are varied though most individuals are seeking information on mental health and substance use disorders. Other common issues include: stress/anxiety, family concerns, financial/employment, domestic violence/child abuse, suicidal ideation, and loneliness/isolation. Counselors provided brief interventions to more than 1,700 callers and referred more than 1,200 callers to behavioral health treatment providers and other community agencies.

When the CareLine debuted, it was initially staffed by OhioMHAS Recovery Services workers who normally provide counseling services within the state prison system, but who were temporarily reassigned due to COVID-19 safety precautions. When those counselors returned to their usual duties, OhioMHAS called upon its community partners who provide coverage on a regional basis as part of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Centers network.

“The demand was there, and we wanted this to be a support for Ohioans beyond the pandemic, so we looked to our community partners to carry the work forward,” said Director Criss. “The provider network stepped up in a big way. Our partners were eager to help keep things rolling -- the CareLine would not be the success it is today without their knowledgeable, caring, and compassionate staff answering calls.”

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Those partners include:

- Talbert House (Southwest – 513 and 937 area codes)
- Helpline of Delaware/Morrow Counties (Central – 614 and 380)
- Scioto Paint Valley Mental Health Center (Southeast – 740 and 220)
- We Care Regional Crisis/Coleman Professional Services (Northwest – 419 and 567)
- Rescue Mental Health and Addiction Services (Northwest – 567)
- Frontline Service (Cleveland area – 216)
- Help Network of Northeast Ohio (Lake area – 440)
- Portage Path Behavioral Health (Northeast – 330 and 234)
- Coleman Professional Services (Northeast – 330 and 234)

In March, the Ohio Psychiatric Physicians Foundation [named](#) the Ohio CareLine its 2021 Enlightenment Award winner, noting the service has been invaluable throughout the pandemic. The award recognizes outstanding activities, presentations or publications which enhance the public's access to treatment and/or enhances the public's understanding of mental disorders or decreases the stigma often associated with mental illness.

“We are so grateful for this recognition of our efforts to make help visible and easily accessible and to connect Ohioans to critical mental health services and recovery supports,” Director Criss said. “The CareLine is possible because of the exceptional collaboration among our community partners and our internal prevention, recovery services, quality, and technology teams,” noting the valuable role regional partners have played in the CareLine’s success.

For more information about the Ohio CareLine, visit: <https://mha.ohio.gov/Health-Professionals/About-Mental-Health-and-Addiction-Treatment/Emergency-Preparedness/Coronavirus/Ohio-CareLine>

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The following anecdotes were shared by CareLine counselors:

Coping with Depression

In early March, a male of about 50 years old wanted to describe his personal frustrations with the pandemic. The caller had described how he had fallen behind in his mortgage payments due to joblessness. He also described poor physical health conditions, which were complicated by feelings of acute anxiety, depression, and isolation. The hotline operator engaged with the caller by using active listening skills, various reflective techniques, and empathy...eventually the caller was able to regulate his emotions toward a more manageable state. The hotline operator shared that it is OK to not be OK...eventually, the call had a successful outcome as the caller shifted cogitations from self-doubt to a place of unanimity, acceptance, and hope.

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Supporting Ohio's Teens

"A father called regarding his 12-year-old daughter and asked if I would speak with her. The daughter was having a hard time not being able to see her friends. She did have two sisters, but it was not the same. The girl was feeling lonely and depressed. Suggested she and her sisters make a video a day in their life of quarantine and send it to friends and family. She became excited. One of her sisters was teaching her how to cook. Encouraged her to continue to learn and, when the quarantine lifts, she could invite her friends over for a picnic/tea party where she cooked for them. I spoke with the father prior to ending the call and he stated his daughter's spirits were uplifted again and she appeared excited."

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Connections to Mobile Crisis Care

"I have handled three calls from people in the midst of panic attacks and have successfully supported them through the episode and helped them achieve a state of calmness. I have completed a warm transfer to a mobile crisis unit and provided an ear to people who are lonely and anxious. Many callers are seeking reassurance and are feeling isolated."

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Support for First Responders

"One of my favorite callers is a RN. She's played a tremendous role through this pandemic. Working on the frontline has affected her mental health severely. After a night shift, the caller would call the Ohio Careline to decompress. She expressed that it was hard to separate work from home because how anxious she'd become. To shift the caller's focus, we'd talk about food. She mentioned that cooking was one of her favorite pastimes and we'd exchange recipes during the phone call. After we talked about ingredients, preparations, and the final dish the caller was in a calmer state of mind."

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Providing Caregivers with resources and Encouragement

"Recently, I received a call from a man who was a caregiver to his mother. The caller was looking for ways he could have someone to come to her home to give her the vaccine. ... We connected with the Council for the Aging (which) assisted the caller with screening and transporting the vaccination to (his) mother. The Caller was relieved to have crossed the barrier for his mother to gain access to the vaccination."