



## 2024 Northeastern Minnesota Community Listening Session Report March 7, 2025

### Working Together to Find Solutions in Mental and Behavioral Health

In 2024 Wilderness Health hosted five community listening sessions across Northeastern Minnesota. These were held in Silver Bay (Lake County); Ely, Virginia, and Hibbing (Northern St. Louis County); and Cohasset (Itasca County). We believe that inviting community members to have a say in their care is the best way to create care that works.

Wilderness Health hosted the events with the help of Northspan Group, Inc. and Nelle Rhicard. Northspan is a regional community and business development consulting organization. Nelle Rhicard of ReFrame Ideas is a local graphic recorder. Northspan assisted with facilitation and collation of data. Rhicard captured the undertones of the conversation and personal stories through imagery.



The goal of these listening sessions was to invite community members to share their experiences navigating mental and behavioral healthcare to identify strategies for change. Wilderness Health met with community members who had personal experience, had loved ones with experience, and others who had an interest in improving mental health care.

The ORID (Observe, Reflect, Interpret, and Decide) method was used to lead the sessions. ORID is a facilitation method that helps people hold focused conversations to reach agreement or clarify differences. Participants used large sticky notes to write down solutions to care barriers. Participants grouped similar

ideas together on the wall, and these groupings led to categories of strategies for change. Solutions and strategies for change were reviewed from each session and combined to create overarching regional strategies.

**Wilderness Health, together with Northspan and the community, defined eight strategies for change:**

1. **Improving Fair & Equitable Access**
2. **Developing Community-Based Support Networks**
3. **Recruiting & Retaining Workforce**
4. **Advancing Integrated Health System Changes**
5. **Increasing Acceptance & Reducing Stigma**
6. **Empowering Care Support Through Education**
7. **Enhancing Early Detection**
8. **Implementing Trauma-Informed Intake Processes**



### ***Importance of Community Involvement***

At Wilderness Health, we believe that keeping the community involved is key to advancing rural health. We listen carefully to what our communities say and share that feedback to make sure we understand their needs. This helps us find even more ways to get everyone involved.

We know that we don't work alone. We rely on our members, community groups, and patients to guide our work. To make sure we have heard everyone's thoughts from our community meetings, we are using a feedback survey. The survey will show us which ideas for change are most important. This information will shape our future work to better serve our community.

### ***Feedback Survey***

[The Strategies for Change Feedback Survey](#) takes about 5-10 minutes to complete. The survey asks respondents to rate the importance of each strategy. Opportunities for further comment are also included. Wilderness Health welcomes all community feedback. We are asking community members to complete the survey by April 18, 2025.

For more information, please contact Zomi Bloom at [zomi.bloom@wildernesshealthmn.org](mailto:zomi.bloom@wildernesshealthmn.org) or visit our website at <https://wildernesshealthmn.org/>.

### ***How We Will Use the Information***

Wilderness Health is working on a grant from the Health Services and Resources Administration (HRSA) Rural Health Network Development Program (RHND). The goal is to make it easier for patients with mental and behavioral health issues to get the care they need in our mostly rural region. We use feedback from our community to guide our actions and plan for the future.

Throughout our work, we have found that good access to mental health resources is very important. It helps us reach four key goals: better health outcomes, lower care costs, better patient experience, and an improved work environment for our care teams. Funding this grant is helping us build a care coordination model that supports patients and families.

We know that getting mental health care can be confusing. The referral process is often hard for patients, families, and providers to understand. It can be difficult for a patient to know which type of healthcare services they need. We will share our findings with other groups like lawmakers, nonprofits, health plans, government agencies and others who can impact and improve programs to improve the health of our region.



## *Strategy 2: Developing Community-Based Support Networks*

Developing Community-Based Support Networks includes increasing peer-to-peer support groups, creating safe and inclusive community spaces, strengthening crisis and emergency support systems, improving access to resources and services, and reducing isolation and strengthening social reintegration.



### ***Suggestions from the community:***

- Build more support groups for the community; focus on caregiver wellness; peer-to-peer support groups; and sharing with others what we know works
- Create other mental health hubs and “third spaces” such as the library, community center, town halls parks; connect county and healthcare systems to community-based organizations
- Reduce isolation after mental health crisis with follow-ups and social reintegration
- Reduce processing time from first call to actual help received; develop an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team in each county to support transition and reduce rehospitalization

Listening session participants shared that they felt more community support was needed for comprehensive mental health care. Community isolation and loneliness negatively impact mental health. Community members felt coming together to support each other, having group counseling, and places to gather would create a community of healing.

### ***Next Steps by Wilderness Health***

Wilderness Health will work with community partners to tie social support referral pathways into our health systems. We will identify opportunities to connect with community groups who are working for grassroots change locally.

### *Strategy 3: Recruiting & Retaining Workforce*

Recruiting & Retaining Workforce includes increasing workforce supply, improving work conditions to reduce turnover, strengthening professional support and communication, supporting first responders and other professionals with self-care resources, and expanding access to mental health services in rural areas.



#### ***Suggestions from the community:***

- Mental health experts and primary care providers who are culturally-informed
- Provide broad training for mental health providers in dementia, trauma-related conditions, and non-medication treatments for behavioral health
- Provide mental health resources to first responders for self-care
- Reduce turnover rates for mental health providers; increase transparency in job tasks for future mental health providers
- Incentives and discounts to help increase providers; research lived experience in rural areas; develop a pipeline that understands key drivers such as personal experience with the profession and the region as well as barriers to entry

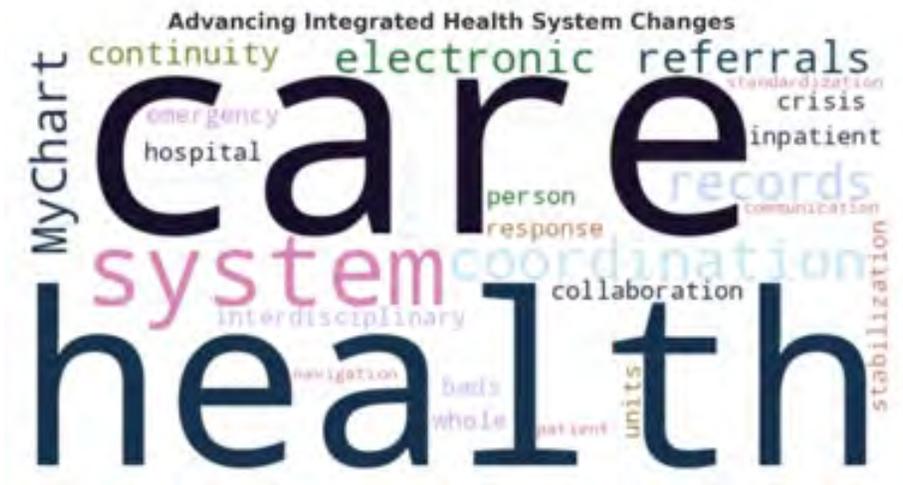
Community members felt that having providers who understand their lived experiences is essential to their mental health journeys. Creating a healthy community that is confident in their care starts with our workforce. Community members identified opportunities such as increasing the pipeline of mental health and primary care providers who could understand a wide range of backgrounds and behavioral health conditions. They spoke about supporting the workforce to reduce burnout and provide appropriate pay.

#### ***Next Steps by Wilderness Health***

Wilderness Health will support student opportunities, education opportunities for staff, and maintain beneficial relationships to promote workforce development. We have relationships with regional educational institutions and work with workforce organizations across the region.

## *Strategy 4: Advancing Integrated Health System Changes*

Advancing Integrated Health System Changes includes enhancing care coordination and communication, implementing electronic health record (EHR) improvements, expanding access to emergency and crisis care, and promoting a holistic, patient-centered approach.



### *Suggestions from the community:*

- Enhance law enforcement interactions by advocating for mental health professional/law enforcement officer dyad teams
- Build processes so that information follows the person, for example in a rollover to a new provider; use standardized information releases and record sharing
- Make referrals to community-based organizations and support groups, and behavioral healthcare after Alzheimer's diagnosis
- Implement the principles of emPATH (Emergency Psychiatric Assessment, Treatment, and Healing) units for effective crisis intervention in the emergency department and integration into inpatient psychiatric units
- Enhance care navigation such as through functional resources for individuals, family coordination, multispecialty conferences, and establish a clearinghouse navigator who is aware of specialties and availability
- More resources available in local communities; Duluth is too far

Community members expressed that mental and behavioral healthcare is siloed and were concerned that relevant care records and information are not easily shared among providers. Patients need their information to follow them and desire an integrated approach that incorporates the whole person. Secure and compliant records sharing systems, mental health specific emergency rooms, and enhanced communication among healthcare and community providers would be helpful.

### *Next Steps by Wilderness Health*

Wilderness Health regularly assesses the integration of mental and behavioral healthcare into primary care settings and is working to address barriers to integration. We will share feedback with regulatory bodies about the importance of sharing records seamlessly for coordinated care.

## *Strategy 5: Increasing Acceptance & Reducing Stigma*

Increasing Acceptance & Reducing Stigma includes changing perceptions and normalizing mental health conversations, community engagement and awareness campaigns, addressing stigma in healthcare and crisis response, and policy and systemic changes to reduce stigma.



Suggestions from the community:

- Promote acceptance of disease by the patient and family; support the patient and family so that patients feel safe saying “yes” to help
- Hold community mental health events and build a community of trust and connections to resources
- Promote better conditions and respect in residential facilities and hospital mental health units
- Implement outreach and networking; tell deidentified stories including crisis, obstacles, and successes to share with others
- Reduce stigma through mental health parity payment reform and in the community

Stigma was a topic that came up in every listening session. Participants shared feelings of shame, inadequacy, and judgment of self and others. Community members felt that care teams had been judgmental at times. Stigma can cause feelings of isolation which lead to worsened mental health. They expressed the need to normalize conversations about mental health and promoting acceptance of mental health conditions.

### *Next Steps by Wilderness Health*

We will identify opportunities to work with our network of hospitals and clinics to explore bias and stigma around mental and behavioral illness and to increase acceptance of people who are struggling with these conditions. Wilderness Health will explore ways to work with communities through outreach and increase education in order to enhance understanding and acceptance.



## *Strategy 7: Enhancing Early Detection*

Enhancing Early Detection includes implementing routine mental health screenings, expanding access to preventative mental healthcare, reducing barriers to diagnosis and care, and education on recognizing early symptoms of mental health conditions.



Suggestions from the community:

- Provide early intervention behavioral support for children 0-5 years old
- Promote mental health annual check-ups starting in pre-school and continuing, just like we do annual hearing screenings
- Support schools with staff and capacity to screen and either provide or make referrals for behavioral health support
- Services need to be preventative not reactionary
- Use standardized practices to assess people at different life stages; consider conditions that impact people at different life stages

“We have well-child check-ups for physical illnesses -- why not mental illnesses?” asked a participant in one of our listening sessions. Our community participants understand that early intervention and preventative care is powerful. It costs less for communities, patients, and health facilities to prevent an illness than it does to treat the illness. Participants suggested promoting early childhood intervention and supporting schools in screening, as well as screening regularly throughout the lifespan.

### ***Next Steps by Wilderness Health***

Wilderness Health will work with community organizations and our care coordination teams to identify and provide resources for youth with mental and behavioral health needs. We will share ideas about funding for mental and behavioral health prevention in our reports to state and federal agencies; and pursue opportunities to share feedback with advocacy organizations.

## *Strategy 8: Implementing Trauma-Informed Intake Processes*

Implementing Trauma-Informed Intake Processes includes creating a safe and respectful intake experience, streamlining and simplifying intake processes including access to health records, involving support persons in care, and training staff in trauma-informed care.



Suggestions from the community:

- Allow support people for persons in crisis in hospital and residential settings
- Reach out after trauma to help people process
- Encourage record sharing and for providers to read health history notes from other providers to enhance continuity of care
- Trauma-informed intake processes including ensuring staff and providers are trained in trauma-informed care

When patients come to the Emergency Department or access crisis care, they are often experiencing one of the worst days of their lives. Getting care that is shaped around understanding of trauma response and reactions can help to minimize stress during a visit. Our community participants advocated for a trauma-informed approach which encourages staff to have a more complete understanding of the patient's life situation to encourage healing and prevent re-traumatization. A trauma-informed framework also prioritizes promoting physical and psychological safety and trust.

### ***Next Steps by Wilderness Health***

Wilderness Health will work with community and health system partners to identify opportunities for trauma-informed care education. We will identify ways to work with care teams and our communities to understand trauma and the impacts of trauma on patient and family experiences.

## What Comes Next?

Wilderness Health is committed to advancing rural health. To do this effectively we must ensure that rural patients are satisfied with care and services. Wilderness Health is currently collecting feedback about the identified strategies for change to reinforce the patient voice within our work. Following community feedback, Wilderness Health will make necessary adjustments and begin working on the specific action steps that can be taken to address each strategy for change.

We realize that many of these solutions need to be discussed on a larger scale and addressed through policy changes. For items that are beyond our direct influence, we will seek opportunities to share our community feedback with advocacy groups and government agencies from the local to the federal level. Wilderness Health is committed to advocating for our patients by tackling issues like care barriers and the broader health and social challenges in rural communities.

## Additional Graphics

Please see additional graphics prepared by Nelle Rhicard of ReFrame Ideas on the Wilderness Health website at <https://wildernesshealthmn.org/> on our Mental and Behavioral Healthcare Navigation page.

## Funding Acknowledgement

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 <p>The logo for Wilderness Health features three stylized green mountain peaks above the text "WILDERNESS HEALTH" in a grey, sans-serif font.</p>	<p><b>About Wilderness Health</b> - a non-profit collaborative of independent providers working together to improve rural health care in Northeastern Minnesota and Wisconsin. Headquartered in Two Harbors since 2013, Wilderness Health aims to create a unified and supportive network for its members through its core values of collaboration, independence, networking, and quality. For more information about Wilderness, visit <a href="https://wildernesshealthmn.org/">https://wildernesshealthmn.org/</a>.</p> <p><b>Wilderness Health Members:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Aspirus Lake View</li><li>Aspirus St. Luke's</li><li>Bigfork Valley Hospital</li><li>Community Memorial Hospital</li><li>Cook Hospital</li><li>Ely-Bloomenson Community Hospital</li><li>Fairview Range / Range Regional Health Services</li><li>Grand Itasca Clinic &amp; Hospital</li><li>North Shore Health</li></ul>
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