

# Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, Spectrum Health

In the Grand Rapids community, like many other communities, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of children who are experiencing a multitude of suicide risk factors. Helen DeVos Children's Hospital (HDVCH), part of Spectrum Health, is a 234-bed comprehensive children's hospital in downtown Grand Rapids, that not only serves the needs of the local community, but also is a regional referral center for Spectrum Health and western Michigan. During the pandemic, HDVCH and community partners responded quickly to the increased need for behavioral health services and found new ways to provide them.

Telehealth use increased from 5% of all services prior to COVID-19 to

84%

of all services once the pandemic started.

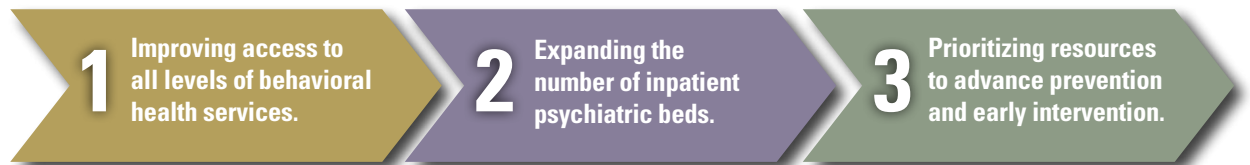
## Executive Summary

Shortly after Spectrum Health opened the new [Helen DeVos Children's Hospital](#) (HDVCH) in 2011, its emergency department (ED) became flooded with behavioral health needs. The greater Grand Rapids, Mich., area had also seen a significant increase in child and adolescent admissions for a multitude of psychiatric and behavioral diagnoses, such as suicide attempts and suicidal ideation. However, there were limited community resources and services available to support this patient population.

HDVCH was built without a behavioral health care unit since those services were provided by other organizations in the community. Yet, as a major referral center, an increasing number of children and adolescents sought treatment for behavioral health disorders that required inpatient psychiatric admission – allowing the hospital few alternatives for children and adolescents with behavioral health diagnoses left waiting in the hospital and/or ED for an inpatient psychiatric bed to become available. “By the time the child is in the emergency department, the system has failed way upstream,” said Shari Schwanzl, R.N., HDVCH’s vice president and chief nursing officer.

To provide better behavioral health care to pediatric patients in the Grand Rapids community, Schwanzl spearheaded a partnership with behavioral health community representatives from [Forest View Psychiatric Hospital](#), [Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services](#) and [Wedgwood Christian Services](#).

### Immediate priorities focused on:



Through HDVCH’s partnerships, the number of inpatient psychiatric beds at other facilities were expanded to provide appropriate care for this vulnerable patient population. The collaboration between HDVCH nurses and the community has resulted in an increase of patients who are medically cleared and transferred directly from the ED to Pine Rest, Forest View and Wedgwood. The most important aspect of this partnership has been the expeditious and appropriate care for behavioral health pediatric patients.

In response to increased need, Spectrum Health implemented a team S.A.F.E. (**S**tay with the student; **A**ccess help; **F**eelings: Validate their feelings; **E**liminate lethal risk) response protocol and trained more than 5,000 employees on how to respond at a moment’s notice to a patient who may have thoughts of suicide. This protocol included quick patient safety responses and communication with the code words “Blue Envelope.” This protocol was customized to create School Blue Envelope to train school personnel.

Spectrum Health President and CEO Tina Freese Decker emphasized the commitment to behavioral health by hiring a new division chief of behavioral health to drive the effort.

“Spectrum Health is committed to improving mental, emotional and behavioral health in west Michigan, beginning with increasing access to services for the pediatric population,” said Decker. “We have a significant mental health crisis in our community that’s especially affecting our children and youth. And we know we won’t be able to solve this problem alone. It’s going to take all of us, working together.”

## Community Profile

HDVCH, part of Spectrum Health, is a 234-bed comprehensive children’s hospital in downtown Grand Rapids, that not only serves the needs of the local community, but also is a regional referral center for Spectrum Health and western Michigan. Affiliated with the [Michigan State University College of Human Medicine](#), the hospital provides comprehensive pediatric specialties and subspecialties to infants, children, teens and young adults ages 0-21 and features an ACS-verified level I pediatric trauma center. Its pediatric intensive care unit and neonatal intensive care units also serve the region.

The 2019-2020 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) linked the state and insurance funding systems to the lack of mental health resources and shortage of appropriate providers in Kent County. These factors make it difficult to address problems early, and instead lead to waiting until medication or hospitalization is needed. The shortage of appropriate providers puts a strain on EDs and primary care providers, who often lack the support and training to serve as mental health workers — particularly among the pediatric population.

<b>ORGANIZATION: Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital</b>	
<b>Primary focus</b>	To raise community awareness of the placement crisis for pediatric behavioral health inpatient services and reduce waiting time for children and adolescents seeking behavioral health care services.
<b>Community partners</b>	Initially, two major behavioral health care systems (Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services and Forest View Hospital), a large behavioral health care community services organization (Wedgwood Christian Services) and community agencies ( <a href="#">Hope Network</a> and Network 180); then added payers ( <a href="#">Priority Health</a> and <a href="#">Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan</a> ) and government relations officials.
<b>Aligns with CHNA*</b>	Yes.
<b>Legal entity</b>	Not a separate entity; community partnership.
<b>Started</b>	2012
<b>Staffing</b>	Led by HDVCH chief nursing officer and the C-suite team.
<b>Initial capitalization</b>	None required; participants in the partnership voluntarily grant time and resources to the effort.
<b>Ongoing funding</b>	HDVCH has required significant ongoing support of the effort with capital and program funding.
<b>Role of Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital</b>	Leader/facilitator.
<b>Behavioral health service-line leader role</b>	Initially, HDVCH and Spectrum Health did not have a behavioral health service line or leader. Now, Spectrum Health has recognized the need for an independent psychiatric service line, and that leader is responsible for both pediatric and adult populations. Schwanzl continues to serve as the liaison to the community partnership with input from the system behavioral health leader.
<b>Unique element of partnership</b>	Focus exclusively and directly on child and adolescent population; established business associate and other agreements to jointly discuss cases shared between organizations without any significant financial investments other than labor.

\*Community Health Needs Assessment

### **Behavioral Services Development**

HDVCH continues to look at ways to support the behavioral health patient population in the Grand Rapids community, including:

- Supporting the community’s autistic behavioral health population.
- Creating a cohort of admitted behavioral health patients on one floor of HDVCH, including trained behavioral health technicians and behavioral health-trained nurses.
- Reducing safety events/assaults to staff and patients at HDVCH through utilization of de-escalation training and management of patients with behavioral health issues.

Cut by  
**50%**  
or more  
the number  
of patients in  
the hospital  
awaiting  
placement  
from 12 to  
between four  
and six on an  
average daily  
basis.

- Dispelling the misunderstanding in the community that HDVCH has inpatient pediatric psychiatric beds.
- Improving the process for medical clearance so that the patient can be evaluated sooner by [Network 180](#), the community mental health authority for Kent County. This community partner would determine eligibility for transfer to an inpatient psychiatric facility as soon as the physician deems the patient medically cleared for admission. Psychiatrists and Network 180 have already met to create updated guidelines and a process to decrease required labs to achieve medical clearance.

A community partnership between HDVCH and local psychiatric facilities ensures an appropriate level of specialty care for this patient population. This specialty inpatient care is not available at HDVCH, therefore proving the need for the community facilities partnership to complete the continuum of care for psychiatric/behavioral health pediatric patients.

### **HDVCH Goals**

The goals of HDVCH are to improve access for children and adolescents in the community by:

- Enhancing community service performance by building relationships.
- Raising awareness of the challenge of children and adolescents getting the right care at the right time and place in the behavioral health care system.
- Sharing resources and best practices.
- Educating and informing each other regarding programs, services and access.
- Communicating to prioritize appropriate utilization for beds for highest acuity patients.

### **Innovative Approaches**

HDVCH invested in renovations to the hospital, including developing a sensory room; staff training; and enhanced staffing, including three child psychiatrists, security officers, behavioral health technicians and six to eight psychiatric nurses. These investments were necessary to provide the safest care possible even though the organization does not formally operate an inpatient behavioral health care unit. The facility renovations were extensive and included creation of a quiet room, two “safer” rooms on a medical/surgical unit, and eventually a six-bed unit to more safely manage the care of the most highly aggressive children as they await placement in other facilities.

Specific patient behavioral events protocols were put in place to screen for both suicide risk and aggression, either in the ED or on admission to the inpatient unit. If a patient screens positive for suicide and/or aggression, staff initiate the appropriate safety interventions and a Best Practice Alert goes out with appropriate orders. If the patient demonstrated aggressive/violent behavior and/or had thoughts of harming others in the last 24 hours, staff can place a Violent Threat Flag on the patient’s chart. This situational awareness tool alerts staff that the patient has exhibited aggressive behavior and/or expressed verbal threats and promotes vigilance in keeping a safe environment for both patients and caregivers.

Other community providers also stepped in to help. Several embarked on major expansions of services to meet needs, including opening additional pediatric patient care units on their campuses and participating in conferences with the care team. One community provider even established a mobile crisis service focused directly on the needs of children and adolescents.

These efforts also expanded into adult behavioral health care services. Spectrum Health Gerber Memorial, in partnership with Newaygo County Mental Health, extended behavioral health care services to primary care and OB-GYN offices by integrating licensed medical social workers as part of the multidisciplinary team. The system also tackled the opioid epidemic by offering alternatives to opioids to patients seeking care in the ED, thus reducing initial opioid exposure between 25% and 41%.

In addition, Spectrum Health took an inward approach, launching suicide prevention programs and training. The [Zero Suicide](#) initiative and [Blue Envelope](#) program help staff understand how to care for patients or co-workers who may be at risk of suicide. Furthermore, area school districts have asked for Spectrum Health’s help in training their staff using the Blue Envelope program.

## Key Learnings and Takeaways

For other communities with similar challenges who may be thinking of starting a collaborative, Schwanzl identified the following success factors and barriers

### Success factors

- Get to know your community partners; be collaborative.
- Have a strong senior leader willing to serve as an active advocate.
- Be willing to tell your story, and don't assume other organizations know your situation until you have "walked in each other's shoes."

### Barriers

- Infrequent and lack of formal training of care team members.
- Delays in initiating community response.
- State-specific differences in the payment system causing variability in how the system is funded.

The primary measures of success are evident in the profound reduction in the number of children "stuck" in the system and the improvement in the environment of safety for the patients, family and staff members who participate in patient care. Specifically, the activities have:

- Cut by 50% or more the number of patients in the hospital awaiting placement from 12 to between four and six on an average daily basis.
- Improved the percentage of children discharged with wraparound services.
- Significantly reduced the number of staff injuries.
- Increased staff confidence in managing children with behavioral health needs or developmental disorders.

## Impact of the Pandemic on the HDVCH and Beyond

In the Grand Rapids community, like many other communities, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of children who are experiencing a multitude of suicide risk factors. Family conflict and low parental monitoring increases the risk of suicide for these children. For teens, the impact of social distancing may be particularly difficult, and teens who are experiencing social isolation are more likely to attempt suicide. Children and adolescents are also at a higher risk of trauma, as they may be isolated from positive external supports and witnessing within their homes increased anger and irritability that erupt into fights, domestic violence and child abuse.

During the pandemic, community partners responded quickly to the increased need for behavioral health services and found new ways to provide them. Network 180 transitioned from in-person to telehealth interventions; telehealth use increased from 5% of all services prior to COVID-19 to 84% of all services. Network 180, Pine Rest and Forest View Hospital launched the "Don't Go Out, Reach Out" campaign that encourages residents to contact local mental health agencies and 24/7 hotlines instead of going to EDs. There were times in the midst of 2020 when inpatient psychiatric and residential services were at capacity. HDVCH was seeing daily six to eight youths who needed to be medically stabilized and were waiting for placement. Recently, the number of children waiting for placement at HDVCH rose significantly, almost four-fold, to 29.

HDVCH will continue to work with the community partners and offer additional behavioral health care programming on its campus and will focus more on individualized treatment options for its patients, with particular attention on children with developmental disorders, such as autism spectrum disorders – a patient population among the most challenging to identify appropriate levels of care.