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news **CONNECTION**

Transforming Young Lives: How a school-based therapist solves mental health treatment access problems for children

"I went to therapy as a kid and it benefitted me and my family," says Autumn Miller, behavioral health counselor/therapist at Best Point Behavioral Health. "I enjoy being with people in social settings and I'm driven to help people."

Miller says this is how she simply sums up her job. But one day in her office illustrates her job is anything but simple.

"I usually see six or seven kids during the academic day," she said. "Sometimes there can be more if a student really needs help and the only way I can see them is after school."

Her office is located at Pleasant Run Middle School as part of Best Point's program to locate therapists and counselors where vulnerable kids need them most – in schools where they have access to these services.

"Access is always a problem for any kind of medical services, especially for kids with working parents," said Debbie Gingrich, chief clinical officer at Best Point Behavioral Health. "Placing our specialists in schools helped solve part of the access issue."



The access serves a critical need that would otherwise go unfulfilled.

"I treat a wide variety of things," said Miller. "Your typical things like helping a child stay focused in class, anxiety, coping skills and those kinds of issues; but, I also address suicidal ideation, oppositional defiant disorder, and trauma related disorders, including PTSD."

The conditions Miller treats are becoming more prevalent in the U.S. for youth. In 2020, the number of youths experiencing at least one Major Depressive Episode (MDE) skyrocketed. In Ohio, over 14% of the state's youth population reported at least



one MDE – about 129,000 kids statewide. Almost 50% of those went untreated.

If Miller wasn't in her partner school, her kids could be among those.

"If this service wasn't provided here, these clients would not receive help," she said. "In a realistic world, it's usually hard for parents to take off work and get their kids to and from therapy. Services in the school building helps with access problems."

Ryan Whitaker, dean of students at Pleasant Run Middle School, said a therapist in a school setting provides many benefits including an outlet for students to express feelings, help with unexpected life challenges and creating life goals.

"A therapist is able to communicate with our students, parents, and teachers while acting as a trusted adult that students can easily approach," Whitaker said. "The therapist creates valuable connections in the building, as well as positive relationships with students, which in turn enables them to be successful in school and life."

Miller says sometimes her clients, usually middle school children, do not have a voice to ask for help.

"A child may not use words to indicate 'trauma' in their lives in front of 20 other kids in a classroom," she said. "They often won't indicate adversity to teachers or even parents. Many times, they think their parents are busy enough with work and, in some cases, other siblings, and they do not want to feel like they're a burden."

Miller says this leads to treatable problems snowballing and often getting worse. Treatable illnesses left untreated affect school, academic, social, and even home life. Miller knows because she sees it almost daily.

"I feel like I safety plan a lot," she said. "Worse case – this can lead to suicidal or homicidal thoughts. I talk to parents about locking up sharp objects, firearms, and anything else that can potentially cause harm. Most of the time, the parent's reaction is, 'How did my kid get to this point?'"

Miller said her being in her partner school every day makes her a familiar fixture in the school

and kids can see her before mental or behavioral health problems escalate to a volatile space.

"Therapists aren't authority figures," she said. "We're not disciplinarians. We're on the same team as our client. We give kids an advocate in the school building, and we are there to help them so they have a chance to succeed."

She says the reward in her work is she transforms lives.

"Seeing the progress that clients make is something I can't describe," she said. "The feeling you get where at one point you were concerned about suicide with a client and now you aren't anymore. These moments make it all worth it. It's awesome to see how happy they are in life when they improve with treatment."

Whitaker said Miller has become a part of the school's family of teachers, staff and students.



Profile of a Successful Social Worker

Autumn Miller shared her path to pursuing a career as a behavioral health counselor.

- Undergrad in psychology; master's in social work
- Miller says her passion for helping others in a variety of ways led to her interest in studying social work
- She works at best Point Behavioral Health because of the opportunity to work in urgent care, crisis work, and trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy
- Miller says Best Point Behavioral Health offers great supervision, which any new graduate with a Master's of Social Work or a Licensed professional Counselor will need to pursue their independent license. In other agencies, these supervisory hours can cost the employee out-of-pocket expenses
- Employees at her agency can access Continuing Education Units provided in-house, which are required to keep a therapist's license active