UNITED WAY OF PIERCE COUNTY

PIERCE COUNTY CONNECTED’S
RAPID COVID-19 BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE
COORDINATION RESPONSE

A United Way Innovation Case Study
In March 2020, at the peak of a global pandemic, United Way of Pierce County quickly unified a coalition of community partners to understand the urgent needs of Washington state and the best response efforts. Within weeks, Pierce County Connected, a COVID-19 community response committee, organized 12 behavioral, mental health, and substance abuse disorder providers across the county to identify needs and strategic responses. This is the Behavioral Health POD (BHP). The BHP identified the need to have a single “entry point” from anywhere including home to connect clients with subject matter experts and take action against pandemic-generated issues related to mental health and substance abuse. The BHP chose South Sound 211 to act as the single-entry point. Participating organizations are the top providers of mental health services in the area.

Pierce County’s rapid development of the Behavioral Health Pod was described as “the one good thing” to come out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other areas of health often overlook mental health and substance abuse and navigating through resources for these issues can be difficult. South Sound 211 provides a single-entry point for providers and patients. Prior to the existence of the entry point, people needing help would be given a list of 30 or so providers and have to call each one until an appointment was made. The BHP has made accessing behavioral health services faster and more efficient, allowing 211 to serve people they have not been able to reach before.

In addition to increasing the efficiency of behavioral health resources, the BHP demonstrated the power of collaboration, planning, and relationships. It is also the start of giving the partners involved with the BHP data of the services needed and where the gaps are in the system, and an opportunity to continue the single-entry point for behavioral health beyond the pandemic. Given that United Ways taking on a data sharing and care coordination project typically require 18 months to two years to lay the groundwork for success, Pierce County’s behavioral health pod project has all the makings of an excellent start for their community.

PIERCE COUNTY CONNECTED (PCC) AND THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH POD

United Way of Pierce County and Greater Tacoma Community Foundation (GTCF) have a long history of partnering together. As the public health response to COVID-19 in Pierce County escalated, on March 13, 2020, the two organizations joined up to spearhead an aligned philanthropic response to emerging community needs. Recognizing that no one entity could address all the needs arising from the pandemic, together they launched the Pierce County Connected (PCC) fund, seeded with $750,000 from GTCF. GTCF committed another $1 million in matching dollars for regional funders joining in the effort. Since the launch, numerous regional funders contributed to the fund, and have exceeded the matching amount. PCC has been able to move large amounts of the fund out into the community within weeks of creating the fund.

The Pierce County Connected fund supports organizations providing services to address urgent needs and the disruption of basic human services to Tacoma’s most vulnerable populations due to COVID-19 and the necessary public health measures to address it. Pierce County Connected partners deliver rapid funding to organizations in a way that supports their continued services to vulnerable populations with the fewest barriers possible.
ROLE OF THE 211 NETWORK

The 211 network operates as part of Washington 211. Launched in 2006, the system consists of seven regional call centers. Before 2006, United Way of Pierce County had provided information and referral services for Pierce County since 1991. In 2008, United Way provided coverage for a few call centers that were unable to sustain operations. Today, United Way leads the South Sound 211 call center for three counties in Washington State. The 211 network adapted a “Help Me Grow” style of assistance for Pierce County coordinated care services due to the need to resolve intersectional issues before COVID-19. 211’s robust coordination and referral system was successfully tested in other pods and easily trusted by partnering behavioral health partners. 211 navigators have access to 400 providers, their availability, and accepted insurance plans through the pod.

Like most health and emergency response systems across the country, South Sound 211 call volumes surged up to 50 percent due to the pandemic. Higher call volumes strained the 19 person staff and mostly focused on coordinating access to food, shelter, and maternity supplies. 211 on boarded volunteers and previous work-study staff to assist with these calls. Additional staff provided call centers with the needed support to fulfill all requests and extend operating hours. For nearly three months, 211 centers operated from 6 a.m.–10 p.m., seven days a week.

ABOUT THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH POD

The pod reversed roles in care navigation. Navigators did not have to seek patient updates; instead, health providers provide updates through the pod. Before the pod’s launch, navigating behavioral health services was not as easy. Callers usually needed to make multiple calls to gain a complete understanding of their benefits, coverage, and closest provider. This process was long, confusing, and discouraged individuals seeking help.

Core Components of the Behavioral Health Pod Model

The Behavioral Health Pod has three main strategies:

1. Identify immediate and emerging behavioral health needs of the community.
2. Develop a coordinated point of entry to manage behavioral health resources and referrals that is available to the public.
3. Continue to identify remaining entry points to Pierce County’s behavioral health system.

The next steps in planning for the pod are to develop and release a communication plan. Success for the pod will be all providers coordinating with 211 as the entry point, and an increase in people successfully accessing behavioral health services and programs.

ADVICE FOR UNITED WAYS

For United Ways who want to follow suit, here is some advice from United Way of Pierce County’s experience:

Stay prepared.

The success of the behavioral health pod stems from 211 and United Way’s ability to recognize trends and build on an environment of long-time collaboration and cooperation between local human service organizations. Calls regarding mental health dramatically decreased in March, and the BHP saw this as an opportunity to prepare resources and procedures for increased demand in behavioral health needs. This allowed navigators to screen patients thoroughly and ask more questions regarding resources.

2. Help Me Grow is a system model that works to promote cross-sector collaboration in order to build efficient and effective early childhood systems that mitigate the impact of adversity and support protective factors among families, so that all children can grow, develop, and thrive.