In the fall of 2013, the NH Department of Education (NHDOE), NH Department of Health and Human Services’ Bureau of Behavioral Health (RBH), and the Laconia, Concord and Rochester School Districts were awarded an $8.6 million four-year grant from the US Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to implement a Safe Schools/Healthy Students State Planning Project. One of the overarching goals of this grant is to substantially improve the behavioral health outcomes of the highest-need children, youth, and their families/caregivers by decreasing barriers to access and services.

The grant has five major elements:
1. Promoting Early Social and Emotional Learning and Development,
2. Promoting Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Health,
3. Connecting Families, Schools, and Communities,
4. Preventing Behavioral Health Problems (including Substance Abuse), and
5. Creating Safe and Violence Free Schools.

In the last year, the grant’s first focus was on planning, implementation, and continuous improvement. The project is now entering its second year and is addressing the implementation plan and monitors it regularly.

A major component of this project is locating therapists from Genesis Behavioral Health in each Laconia school. This practice increases student access to mental health treatment, improves collaboration between Genesis and the schools, and provides prevention-based interventions which may alleviate the need for treatment.

This collaborative effort began in the fall of 2014. The role of the school-based therapist goes beyond providing mental health treatment to students and their families. It includes serving as a liaison between school staff and other Genesis staff, conducting mental health screenings to determine the need for treatment, providing groups for students (individually as well as school staff), providing consultation and support to school staff, providing education and support to parents, and participating in various school meetings.

The positive benefits of this effort are already evident:

Hope Ocean is the therapist who works two days per week at both Elm Street Elementary School and Pleasant Street Elementary School. For Hope, the greatest advantage of being in the schools is the ability to observe how children with mental health issues function in the school setting. Observing children in their classrooms gives her a better understanding of the challenges facing teachers, and she is able to help teachers understand the causes of specific behaviors and provide support. Hope noted that working with students in groups has improved student functioning. Students with significant behavioral challenges have experienced significant improvement and shown a dramatic decrease in disciplinary issues as a result of their time with a school-based therapist.

Hope stated, “This grant has improved communication with parents and helped parents gain a better understanding of how mental health issues were impacting school functioning. It’s also greatly improved communication between Genesis and the school, leading to increased participation in treatment planning.”

Currently, there are three Genesis therapists working in four of the five Laconia schools. The intent of the new school-based mental health program is not to transfer open Genesis cases to the school, but to decrease disparities in access that prevented all students from equally accessing Genesis services. Genesis and the Laconia School District worked together to develop a referral process for schools to refer students to the school-based Genesis clinician.

Through the referral process the clinicians are able to support students who were not previously receiving mental health services, either individually or in groups, thereby removing the barriers, such as transportation, that may have impacted their prior ability to access services. Some of the groups that Genesis clinicians are currently running in the schools include: Distress Tolerance, Emotional Regulation, Skill Building, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Processing, Social Skill Building, Anxiety and Safety, and Resiliency – Processing loss and understanding the stages of grief.

The success of the project so far is best summed up in the words of a parent:

“Our child has experienced past trauma as well as a recent trauma with the loss of a very important person in her life. Our first call was to a former Genesis therapist we had successfully worked with in the past and we learned about the new pilot program in the schools. We love the program. It gives Hope a chance to see our child in her daily school life and provides a whole different picture of everyday life with her. Our child has benefited greatly from the program. She quickly realized therapy is helpful and was able to work with other children who experienced loss. Hope is the key to success for us and our daughter.”

Since 2005, Genesis Behavioral Health (GBH) and LRGHealthcare have worked together to ensure the health and wellness of the Lakes Region community. This partnership began more than ten years ago, but it was the 2005 contract for GBH to provide emergency psychiatric services to Lakes Region General Hospital (LRGH) and Franklin Regional Hospital (FRH) that set the tone for growth for both organizations. Over the years, collaborative efforts have expanded to include integration with primary care, providing psychiatry for the Senior Psychiatric Unit at LRGH, expanding emergency services via telemedicine to FRH, recruiting mental health providers to the region, ensuring strong advocacy efforts through a joint board committee, planning and implementing the designated Received Facility at Franklin Regional Hospital, providing support to the Winnipesaukee Wellness Center to offer a facility for GBH’s Healthy Choices, Healthy Changes program.

“With the strong support and partnership with Genesis Behavioral Health, the mission of LRGHealthcare could not be fully realized when it comes to our treatment of mental health issues,” noted Marge Kerns, Vice President of Clinical Services at LRGHealthcare, “I look forward to continuing to work with Genesis to improve the well-being of our shared community.”

This partnership is critical. The Lakes Region Health Data Collaborative’s 2013 Report noted that utilization of emergency departments for mental health conditions is higher than overall for Lakes Region communities compared to the rest of New Hampshire. Nationally, emergency department visits for behavioral health are increasing seven times faster than all other reasons, and the use of the emergency department to treat behavioral health and substance use disorder patients is up 54% since 2007. It is extremely costly to hold behavioral health patients in the emergency department while they wait for a bed at New Hampshire Hospital or other inpatient facility – and this does not take into account the human cost that comes from the patient not receiving the treatment they need to get well while they wait.

In response, GBH and LRGHealthcare are expanding their partnership to include an Urgent Care model for mental health services. This model creates a process that establishes better accessibility, specialized care, and optimized patient flow through the system. There are several ways in which a patient can receive treatment, including:

- Beginning treatment immediately in the emergency department,
- Treatment via telehealth from their PCP’s office and/or at GBH’s offices for stabilization and/or short-term care,
- Admission to a hospital, or
- Treatment while awaiting care with another provider or facility that best meets their needs.

Offering this service is cost-effective, as it is designed to keep people healthy in their communities by giving them the care they need when they need it. The cost of treating a person with mental illness at New Hampshire Hospital is $788 per day, while the cost of services in the community is $120 per day (NAMI NH). This model ensures people with mental health challenges are getting treatment quickly and effectively – meaning they are able to work, volunteer, contribute to society and live healthy and productive lives.

“This project is still in its early stages, but is critically important,” said Maggie Pitchard, Executive Director of Genesis Behavioral Health, “GBH and LRGHealthcare have many years of experience in working together to make a difference for this community, and I look forward to a continued partnership that builds upon our past success and best practices to create new opportunities.”