

**Immediate Release****Contact:**

Bill Schmitt

302-327-3318

[wschmitt@christianacare.org](mailto:wschmitt@christianacare.org)**Christiana Care Health System Boosts Access to Mental Health Care by Integrating Mental Health Experts in Primary Care**

(WILMINGTON, Del., Feb. 29, 2016) - Christiana Care Health System has dramatically increased access to mental health care through the integration of behavioral health specialists into the health system's family medicine practices, opening mental health doors to thousands of children, adolescents and adults who might otherwise never seek help.

The success stories are numerous:

- A young man visited the doctor's office feeling depressed; meeting with a behavioral health therapist disclosed domestic violence was driving the symptoms.
- A woman with diabetes wasn't properly managing her condition because she was having panic attacks about giving herself daily injections; she learned coping and relaxation skills from a therapist enabling her to take her insulin on the prescribed schedule.
- A man facing a series of heart tests for chest pains feared he would need surgical intervention; he was encouraged to learn from his therapist he was instead experiencing the treatable effects of anxiety and depression.

More than 3,100 patients have been seen in 8,500 individual sessions since Christiana Care began integrating behavioral health experts in 11 primary care practices in November 2014. Christiana Care is expanding the model with the recent addition of four new behavioral health therapists.

The recent recommendation from U.S. Preventive Services Task Force that primary care doctors screen all children, adolescents and adults for depression reinforces the value of the integrated model of care.

"There are tremendous benefits to having behavioral health therapists in the primary care setting," said Linda Lang, M.D., chair of the Department of Psychiatry at Christiana Care. "Providing greater access to care is a key factor where patients no longer have to wait to receive behavioral health care. They can have same-day access with a provider who is literally sitting next door."

Success through this model can be found in the real-time collaboration among the patient, primary care provider and behavioral health expert. It's worked well for many years within Christiana Care's cancer program, heart and vascular services, women's health, and internal medicine and pediatrics programs.

About 25 percent of patients seen by primary care doctors have behavioral health issues, according to the American Psychological Association. Many never ask for mental-health

support, either due to stigma or because they simply do not recognize how mind-related issues can cause or worsen many physical symptoms. Those who do follow up on their doctor's recommendation for a mental-health consult have traditionally faced barriers such as lengthy wait times for appointments or insurance limitations.

Primary care doctors, who are often the first to recognize a need for behavioral health care, drive the patient-physician-therapist partnership in the integrated model. With the patient's permission, the doctor can invite an on-site therapist to join them in a convenient, confidential consultation during the medical office visit.

The integrated model eliminates barriers to behavioral health care, allowing patients to be seen by the therapist as part of the medical appointment, where he or she can openly discuss concerns with both the doctor and the therapist. Follow-up appointments are scheduled with the therapist, who is also able to link in support from a psychiatrist for medication issues, when needed.

"This integrative model lets us find and treat behavioral health disorders very early," Dr. Lang said. She likens the close coordination of care between primary care doctor and embedded behavioral health specialist to a woman referred for immediate diagnosis and treatment when something appears on a mammogram.

"Previously, when the primary care doctor referred the patient for a behavioral health consultation, it could take four to six weeks to get an appointment," she said. "Now we come to the patient rather than waiting for the patient to come to us. It's a more holistic approach that offers greater value to our patients."

The focus, she said, is on wellness, prevention and care for the whole person and resolving issues before they build up to serious problems requiring intensive outpatient mental health treatment or hospital admission for medical complications.

### **About Christiana Care Health System**

Christiana Care Health System is one of the country's largest health care systems, ranking as the 22nd leading hospital in the nation and 12th on the East Coast in terms of admissions. The health system includes The Medical Group of Christiana Care, a network of primary care physicians, medical and surgical specialists as well as home health care, preventive medicine, rehabilitation services and patient/family advisors for core health care services. A not-for-profit teaching hospital affiliated with Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University, Christiana Care is recognized as a regional center for excellence in cardiology, cancer and women's health services. Christiana Care has an extensive range of outpatient services, and through Christiana Care Quality Partners, Christiana Care works closely with its medical staff to achieve better health, better access to care and lower cost. Christiana Care is home to Delaware's only Level I trauma center, the highest capability center and the only one of its kind between Philadelphia and Baltimore. Christiana Care features a Level III neonatal intensive care unit, the only delivering hospital in Delaware that offers this highest level of care to the most critically ill newborns. Christiana Care includes two hospitals with 1,100 patient beds.

For more information about Christiana Care, visit [www.christianacare.org/howeare](http://www.christianacare.org/howeare).

#####