

## Constable: 'Telepsychiatry' uses video conferencing to help mental health patients



A psychiatrist in Ohio appears on a video conference in the Chicago office of Regroup to explain how that company's telepsychiatry services can make it easier and cheaper to treat patients in prisons or rural areas with a shortage of mental health professionals. Courtesy of Azeem Zeekrya



7/30/2019 6:43 AM

With physical health, most people embrace the philosophy that preventive care provided by a vaccine is cheaper, easier and safer than a hospital stay to treat a case of potentially fatal measles.

That same concept is true with mental health, says state House [Rep. Michelle Mussman](#), a Democrat from Schaumburg who serves on legislative committees that deal with mental health, human services and elementary education. Paying for the proper psychological help today could save taxpayer money that might otherwise be needed for expensive emergency room visits, hospital stays or prison.

"If I had just gotten you help in the community, could you stay out of that situation?" Mussman asked Monday after watching a presentation of "telepsychiatry," which allows someone with a mental health issue to talk with a psychiatrist by way of an online video conference.

Mussman, whose 56th House District covers all or parts of Hanover Park, Keeneyville, Roselle, Elk Grove Village, Hoffman Estates, Palatine, Schaumburg and Rolling Meadows, joined fellow state Reps. [Robyn Gabel](#), an Evanston Democrat, and [Justin Slaughter](#), a Democrat who represents the South Side of Chicago, for a presentation by [Regroup](#), a Chicago company that is a leader in the telepsychiatry field.

Many studies have found that telepsychiatry is just as effective as meeting with a psychiatrist face to face in an office, said Dr. Hossam Mahmoud, medical direct for Regroup.

And Dr. Omar Elhaj, a psychologist who talked to the Chicago group by way of a camera in his Ohio home, said "sometimes it's even better than face to face." by signing up you agree to our [terms of service](#)

Elhaj recently treated a prison inmate serving a term for murder who was upset after not being granted permission to attend the funeral of his wife of 25 years. During the session, the doctor, who has worked exclusively as a telepsychiatrist the past two years, pointed his camera out his window so the inmate "could see the grass where his wife would be buried."

"That camera gave me something nothing else could have," Elhaj said.

Prisons save money by using telepsychiatry instead of transporting a patient to a facility, said David Cohn, founder and CEO of Regroup. Schools can use telepsychiatry in emergencies the same way the school nurse can treat a skinned knee.

The cost of a two-day hospital stay could pay for 50 telepsychiatry sessions, Mahmoud said.

Mussman said mental health issues have no boundaries.

"We talk about mental health in a number of committees," she said. "There's a whole lot of pieces that overlap."

She notes that one in four Illinois residents has a mental health need at least once a year. "What are we doing to see those needs get met?" Mussman said. "It's something we've got to figure out."

A second group of Illinois legislators, including [Rep. Deborah Conroy](#), a Democrat from Elmhurst, will see the Regroup presentation on Friday.

Regroup provides 10,000 telepsychiatry sessions a month across 20 states, but 70 percent of those cases are in Illinois. More than 4.8 million people in Illinois reside in areas without the necessary behavioral health care, according to [research](#) from the Leonard D. Schaeffer Center for Health Policy & Economics at the University of Southern California.

Many of the mental health issues involve people who receive Medicaid benefits, and Illinois has the eighth-lowest reimbursement rate among the 50 states, which can be a disincentive for physicians to accept patients, the research showed. Some private insurance providers won't cover telepsychiatry.

Mussman said Illinois must find ways to pay for mental health and treat small issues before they become expensive problems.

"Preventive services can save you money in the long run. It's government money well-spent," Mussman says. "But we've got a lot of work to do."