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Help closer than think for mental health

BY JOANIE STIERS

FarmWeek

Jim Birge sees a broken mind as no different than an injured foot.

The Sangamon County Farm Bureau manager has joined 16 other county managers in attaining a three-year certification in Mental Health First Aid, something like CPR for the mind. His goal: Heighten awareness of mental health and break the stigma on an issue growing in prevalence.

“I have never seen a lot of the looks on farmers’ faces that I have seen this year,” said Birge, a manager for 26 years. “It is a look of despair and deep concern. Farmers specifically are very resistant to come forward about anything like that and often live through it alone. I’m hoping that if someone is in a crisis situation, that they, if they are comfortable, can come talk to me.”

Mental health is a personal subject for Birge, who helps care for a sibling with schizophrenia and lost a best friend to suicide. While not a clinician, his personal experiences and his first aid certification help him understand mental crisis situations and the next steps. That may include medical treatment.

Those treatment options are growing in availability and beyond clinic walls, thanks to a nationwide trend to improve accessibility to mental health support.

“There is a trend to provide more access, and telehealth is one of those means,” said Lisa Carlson, a benefits attorney at Lockton Companies in Chicago and a consultant to Illinois Farm Bureau’s Health Care Working Group.

Telehealth, a term used interchangeably with telemedicine, delivers nonemergency health care over the internet from home or other locations. Most large insurance carriers have relationships with telehealth providers and cover these services.

With no need for insurance, MDLIVE provides mental health therapy in Illinois for as low as $99 per virtual visit, Carlson said. Psychiatric services are available, too.

Carlson said this evolution in care puts assistance close to home, often costs less and takes less time.

“People need to know where they can go and get help,” Birge said. “Farmers right now who are stressing are in a much more fragile mental state than normal. We’ve seen more farmer suicides in this general area this year, and it’s a testament to the things going on in the ag community, and we cannot ignore them.”

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Stronger Together

For farm-specific mental health and wellness information, visit {www.ilfb.org/resources/mental-health-wellness}. Click on the menu links to identify stressors and find the wellness tools to help manage them.

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