Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Caregiver Experiences During their Child's Acute Medical Hospitalization for a Mental Health Crisis

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Adolescents in the United States are increasingly seeking treatment for mental health crises in emergency departments and general medical hospitals. Medical needs are often addressed quickly, yet youth remain hospitalized because further psychiatric treatment is not immediately available. We sought to better understand the experiences of caregivers whose children are "boarding" in a medical hospital while awaiting inpatient psychiatric treatment. We conducted semi-structured interviews with caregivers who were recruited, enrolled, and interviewed during their child's hospital stay. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was facilitated by NVivo 12. Fourteen caregivers enrolled in the study. Themes that emerged included positive hospital and provider experiences; frustration with the medical and mental health care systems; information needs; fears about inpatient psychiatric units; practical challenges and emotional needs; difficulties with caregiver-child communication; difficulties with clinician-caregiver communication; and need for self-care and support. While many caregivers felt positively about the overall experience at the hospital, they also wished for more information about their child's treatment plan and future, as well as social support, emotional comfort for themselves, and self-care skills and resources. Their experiences illuminate ways in which clinical practice can ameliorate concerns and alleviate stress of caregivers related to their child's mental health crisis.

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