

# Improving and Sustaining Our Behavioral Health Providers

According to Mark Twain, “Continuous improvement is better than delayed perfection.” We agree.

For years, the corporate sector has used the Six Sigma process for continuous improvement. Six Sigma helps an organization define a problem; quantify it; analyze its cause; and implement, verify, and maintain a solution. Six Sigma has long been used in manufacturing; its use in health care is becoming more common. It’s easy to see why: the results can be impressive.

At Mercy Medical Center, the Six Sigma process significantly improved denial rates and coding issues stemming from Ohio’s Medicaid redesign. It also improved productivity, employee retention, and patient experiences.

Our local behavioral health agencies have faced similar issues for many years. In fact, over the past two decades, three agencies have had to close their doors, impacting thousands of clients. The challenges of running a nonprofit organization, paired with the complexities stemming from multiple funding sources, mean that the remaining agencies must address stability and sustainability.

Mercy leadership, the Sisters of Charity Foundation, and Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery (StarkMHAR) agreed to pilot Six Sigma processes at Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health (C&A). In Stark County, C&A is the primary agency serving children who have behavioral health issues.





Following a successful redesign of its medical department, C&A began to decrease wait times and increase access to services. Unfortunately, keeping pace with demand became more challenging with a surge in youth suicides. That, along with the economic impact from the state's Medicaid redesign, impacted the entire organization.

The Six Sigma process identified inefficiencies, revealed bottlenecks, and determined that common-sense changes would make major impacts.

Early results have been impressive:

**Medicaid denial rates have declined sharply, going from 28% to 5%. The goal? 2% or lower.**

- Billing errors decreased from 15% to less than 1%. The goal? 2% or lower.
- The waiting time for Medicaid payments has decreased from 42 days to 23. The goal? 30 days or fewer.

According to C&A CEO Joe French, "The Six Sigma process has made us fiscally and operationally stronger. This has been a game changer for us and has allowed us to provide the highest level of service to Stark County's youth."

Seeing the clear benefits, local foundations are partnering to support even more organizations.



StarkMHAR will be selecting additional agencies that are ready to engage in the Six Sigma process.

"Being able to support agencies in this way is an essential piece of our work," said StarkMHAR Executive Director John Aller. "This might be the single best thing we do to ensure our behavioral health agencies remain fiscally viable and organizationally sound."

## ICAN: Value Stream Mapping

While StarkMHAR was forming its partnership with Mercy, ICAN Housing was undergoing strategic planning.

ICAN serves homeless people with behavioral health challenges, some of whom are also battling substance use disorders.

During the process, ICAN identified the need to improve quality assurance in agency operations. But how? According to Executive Director Julie Sparks, ideally by engaging a Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt with nonprofit experience.

She found her answer through Kent State University at Stark's Corporate University. The agency engaged two Six Sigma Black Belts to come on site for a multi-day training using the Lean Six Sigma management tool called *Value Stream Mapping* (VSM).

It was critical that staff learn VSM while addressing an issue specific to the agency. This enabled staff to gain proficiency with the tool while addressing an area ripe for improvement: helping participants gain and maintain employment income.

According to Julie, "The results were astounding. Through VSM, we have been able to remove 20 steps from the process, decrease decision-making points by 73%, and reduce service delays by 79%. The agency can now use VSM to review all operations, decrease inefficiencies, increase effectiveness, improve outcomes, and make better use of resources."