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# UA professor talks about mental health provider shortage in Alabama

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By Ugochi Iloka, Reporter

TUSCALOOSA, AL (WBRC) - A new study shows there is a severe shortage of mental health professionals in rural areas, including right here in Alabama.

Recent research shows 65 % of rural counties across the U.S. do not have a psychiatrist and almost half of them don't have a psychologist either.

"I do know in the state of Alabama we do struggle to have enough providers to meet the needs of our populations," said Dr. John Burkhardt clinical psychologist and UA assistant professor.

And with a growing number of people coming forward to seek mental health help, the need is even greater now.

"We're having more awareness and more people who say they have mental health issues, so we need more providers for them, so we must look at ways in how we train people," said Burkhardt.

At the end of the day, UA professor and clinical psychologist Dr. John Burkhardt said there just aren't enough people specializing solely in mental health related fields, when studying medicine, so they've taken a more creative approach to change that.

"It's always going to be difficult to get specialty services into rural areas, so you might find more people who might cross train or have extra experience," said Burkhardt.

At University Medical Center they have a fellowship for professionals in family medicine who can do an extra year of psychiatry rotation, which Dr. Burkhardt said is a good start to combat the shortage problem.

"Take care of these people that we're starting to identify that years ago that A didn't come out or B we didn't identify. I mean depression is the number one topic now," said Burkhardt.

The good news is Dr. Burkhardt said you can start with seeking mental health help from your family physician first, who will then refer you to some options before possibly sending you over to a psychologist or psychiatrist.

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