



— Mental Health and —  
Substance Abuse Coalition

## Mental Health and Substance Abuse Coalition

### Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Community Services in 2020

March 2021



#### **Public Policy & Management Center**

Wichita State University

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## Disclaimer

This study was conducted by the PPMC at Wichita State University (WSU). The PPMC is an independent research body unaffiliated with agencies in this report. This report was prepared by the research team. It represents the findings, views, opinions and conclusions of the research team alone. The report does not express the official or unofficial policy of WSU.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created unprecedented stress on public service, educational and non-profit organizations across the nation, as well as in Kansas and in Sedgwick County. Data from fourteen public agencies and non-profits, including the school system, law enforcement, hospitals, treatment centers and community shelters was collected to compare demand for services in the pre-COVID months to the demand after COVID struck the community. Agencies have had to rapidly respond, innovating traditionally in-person services and implementing new remote technologies. All these factors are converging in the context of limited and insufficient resources.

In Sedgwick County, most services were reduced in March through May of 2020 as agencies transitioned from in-person services to virtual. For most agencies, the number of client contacts fell during peak pandemic months. Declines were due, in part, to COVID mitigation requirements including social distancing and stay-home orders. Agencies report that clients were cautious about seeking services due to the

fear of contracting the virus along with other barriers such as a lack of transportation and loss of jobs and health insurance.

One measure of community stress is the number of calls to United Way's 211 service, a free, confidential service that connects callers to a wide range of resources and services across Kansas. The total number of calls to the 211-phone line grew by 184 percent in 2020, compared to 2019. Calls peaked in July with 17,163 calls.

The closure of schools has caused concern among professionals that vulnerable children are less likely to receive professional services and more likely to suffer from food insecurity and homelessness. In USD 259, school enrollment declined by 4.63 percent, while the number of free meals distributed declined almost 12 percent (11.61%). The number of children reported as homeless dropped about 54 percent (53.6%) when comparing August 2019 and August 2020. This is mostly due to a lack of reporting because children are not in contact with professionals in the school system.

Meeting mental health needs is a critical concern. The number of patients seeking and receiving behavioral health services at COMCARE declined by over 50 percent (51.3%) compared to 2019. Ascension Via Christi also reports the number of behavioral health patients fell sharply below 2019 levels, especially in March and April when the pandemic shut-downs began. Mental health professionals are extremely concerned that social isolation and economic strains are causing fewer people to seek behavioral health services.

The number of suicide cases reported by the Sedgwick County Coroner's office in 2019 was 93 and for 2020 it was 110, an 18 percent increase. However, the coroner's office notes that their case load increased by 18 percent, making the suicides as a percent of total coroner cases stable in 2019 and 2020 at 10.4%. Benchmarking suicides as a percent of population, the 2019 data was 18.3 per 100,000 and in 2020 it was 21.0 per 100,000.

In response to concerns about the spread of COVID in congregate settings, the District Attorney's office reviewed data on inmate charges and allowed inmates with more minor offenses to be released. There is growing stress among inmates who feel "stuck." The average length of stay, or number of days in jail, increased in 2020, as

courts were closed, and cases were delayed. In 2019, inmates were in jail for about 42 days, compared to 60 days in 2020.

Emergency housing shelters report declines in the number of clients they are able to serve due to COVID restrictions. Shelters responded by extending the months of operations for emergency winter shelters, but requirements of social distancing significantly reduced their capacity limits.

Domestic violence is also increasing. Harbor House reports the number of lethality calls, identified by law enforcement who are on-site with a domestic violence victim, increased by 47 percent between 2019 and 2020.

More information is also needed to assess the impact of mental health challenges faced by healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an area that should be explored and reflected on to learn from this experience and to strengthen community mental health providers after care.

Pandemic mitigation efforts, coupled with economic and social stress, makes it problematic for some agencies to identify and serve clients, particularly the vulnerable populations of elderly and children. There is a need to continue to collect and analyze data to determine the impact of interventions, such as tele-medicine and remote education, and to identify new opportunities for services. In addition, development of integrated data systems would make data collection more efficient, allowing agencies to collaborate and respond in a strategic and timely manner. The agencies in this study have provided valuable information to start the process of analyzing the ongoing impact the pandemic has on Sedgwick County. This study offers information to initiate planning and solutions for addressing these challenges.



## INTRODUCTION

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The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created unprecedented stress on public service, educational and non-profit organizations across the nation, Kansas and in Sedgwick County. The *Kansas Speaks Fall 2020 Statewide Public Opinion Survey* (2020) finds that since the start of the pandemic, one-fourth of respondents report that someone in their household had serious problems affording food or medical care, paying utilities, or paying credit cards/loans/debt. In addition, this health crisis has disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations including the poor, homeless and those with mental illness (Tsiaj & Wilson, 2020).

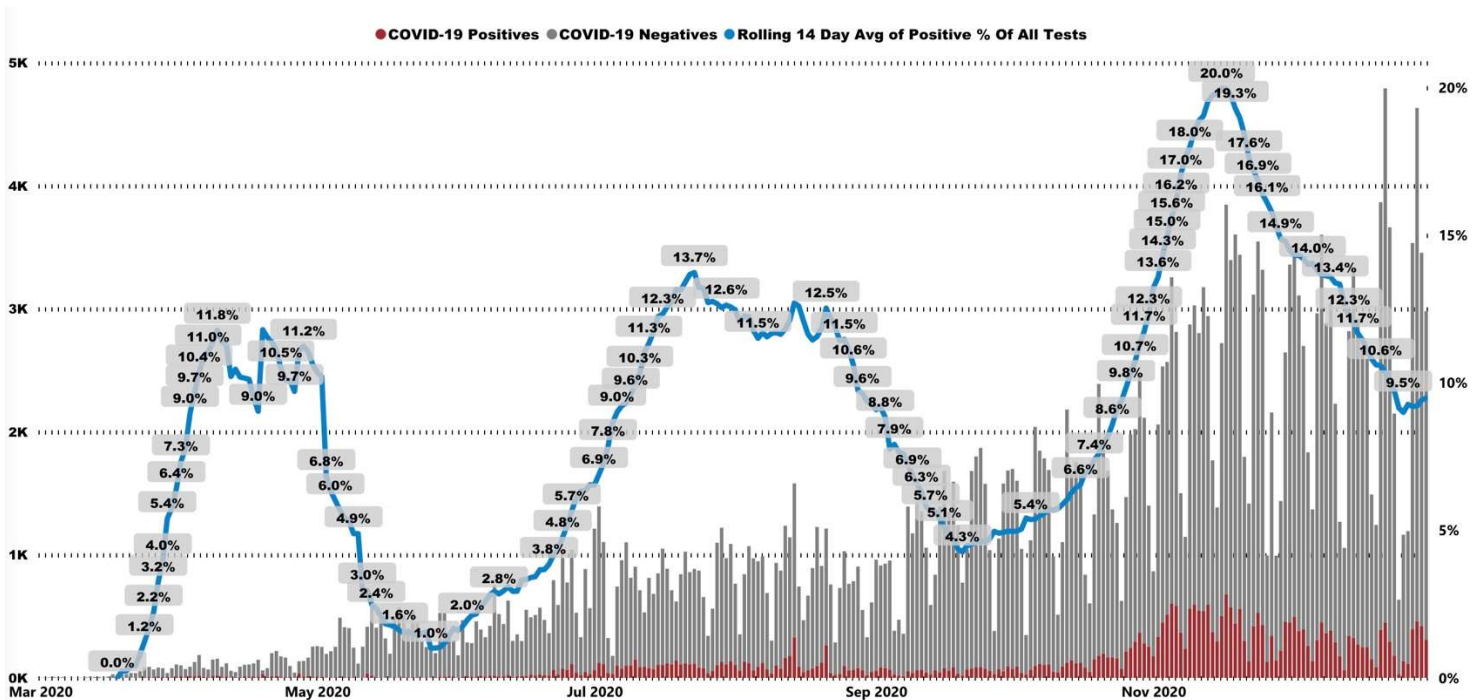
Organizations have had to rapidly respond, innovating traditionally in-person services and implementing new remote technologies. Behavioral health care organizations continue to face serious challenges including adapting to telehealth and remote delivery, protecting client health and safety, and managing staff and personal health and well-being (Murphy, Karyczak, Dolce, Zechner, Bates, et. al., 2020). All these factors are converging in the context of limited and insufficient resources.

Because the pandemic is recent, there are few studies in the literature about the barriers facing behavioral health organizations and public service agencies responding to the crisis. This study examines the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on the demand for community services in Sedgwick County, Kansas.

Data from fourteen public agencies and non-profits, including the school system, law enforcement, hospitals, treatment centers and community shelters was collected to compare demand for services in the pre-COVID months to the demand after COVID struck the community. Interviews with service providers was conducted to assist with data analysis and to document the potential reasons behind the observed trends in data.

Chart 1.0 shows that Sedgwick County has experienced an upward trend in the spread of the virus, with three distinct periods of growth, peaking in April, August and November. As of this report, the virus spread continues in Sedgwick County, despite mitigation efforts.

Chart 1.0: 2020 Sedgwick County COVID 19 Rolling Average







## EDUCATION

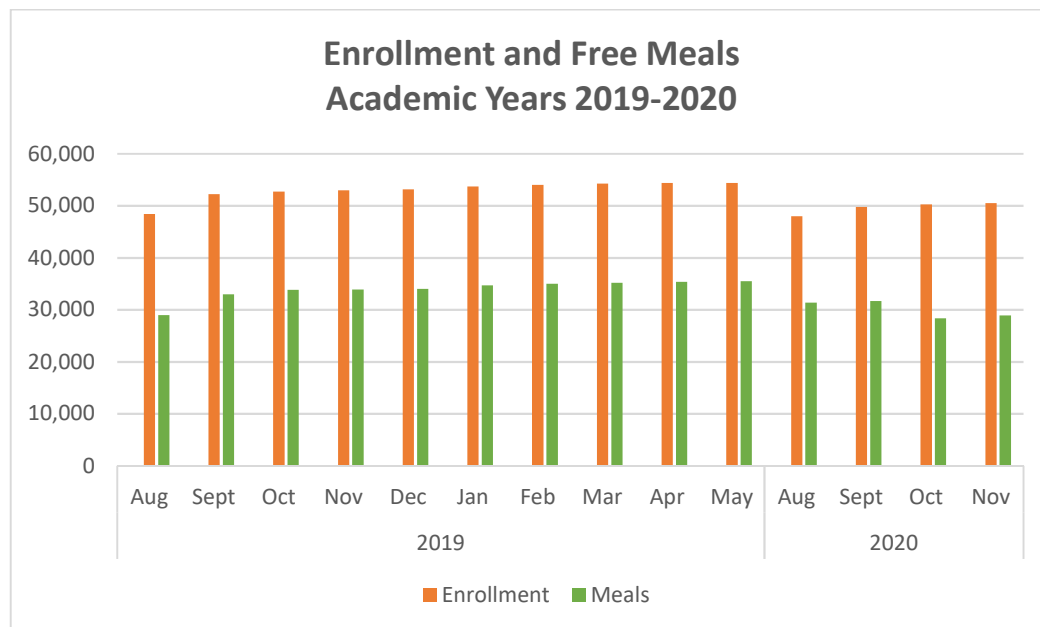
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### **USD 259**

In response to the virus, Unified School District #259 shutdown in March 2020. School closures have seriously disrupted identification of children in need. A recent study by the Brookings Institute (Welch & Haskins, 2020) reports the nation's child welfare system has been rendered powerless due to the stay-at-home orders and school shut-down orders. These orders have limited the ability to detect abuse and neglect, which is heavily dependent on reports by teachers, doctors, and other professionals. In addition, "home investigations, child-parent visits, mandatory court appearances, home-based parenting programs – are now at a near standstill, making it harder and harder for the system to ensure the safety and well-being of the nearly 3.5 million children they come into contact with each year" (Welch & Haskins, 2020). Data indicates that the children in USD 259 are also at-risk. Using the first quarter of 2019 and 2020 academic years to compare before and after impacts of the pandemic (Table 2.1), school enrollment declined slightly by 4.63 percent, while the number of free meals distributed declined almost 12 percent (11.61%). The number of children

reported as homeless dropped about 54 percent (53.6%) when comparing August 2019 and August 2020. This is most likely not due to a real reduction in homelessness, but a lack of reporting because children are not in contact with professionals in the school system.

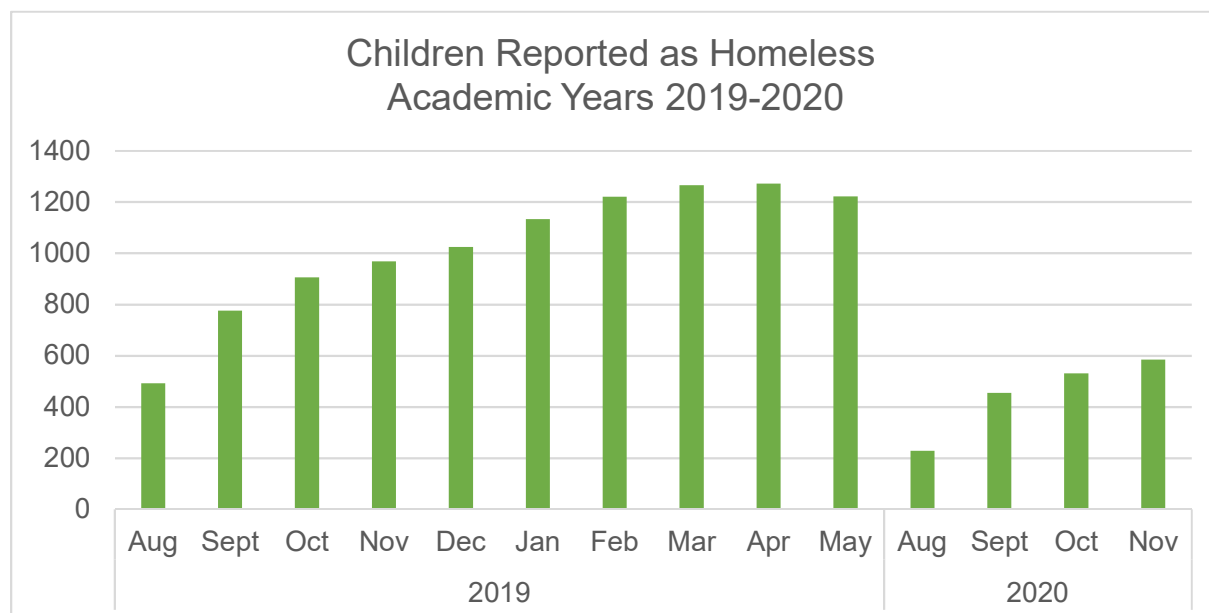
**Chart 2.1: Unified School District 259**



*Table 2.1: Unified School District 259*

<b>District EOM Counts (Active-Inactive)</b>				
<b>Month</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>Meal Status</b>	<b>Homeless</b>
<b>8/14/2019</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>48,407</b>	<b>28,988</b>	<b>492</b>
Sept	2019	52,194	32,955	776
Oct	2019	52,678	33,801	905
Nov	2019	52,956	33,864	968
Dec	2019	53,142	34,032	1024
Jan	2020	53,674	34,658	1133
Feb	2020	54,001	34,974	1221
March	2020	54,257	35,156	1265
April	2020	54,353	35,330	1272
May	2020	54,392	35,495	1222
<b>9/8/2020</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>47,974</b>	<b>31,350</b>	<b>228</b>
Sept	2020	49,772	31,697	454
Oct	2020	50,244	28,354	531
Nov	2020	50,511	28,883	585

*Chart 2.2: Unified School District 259*





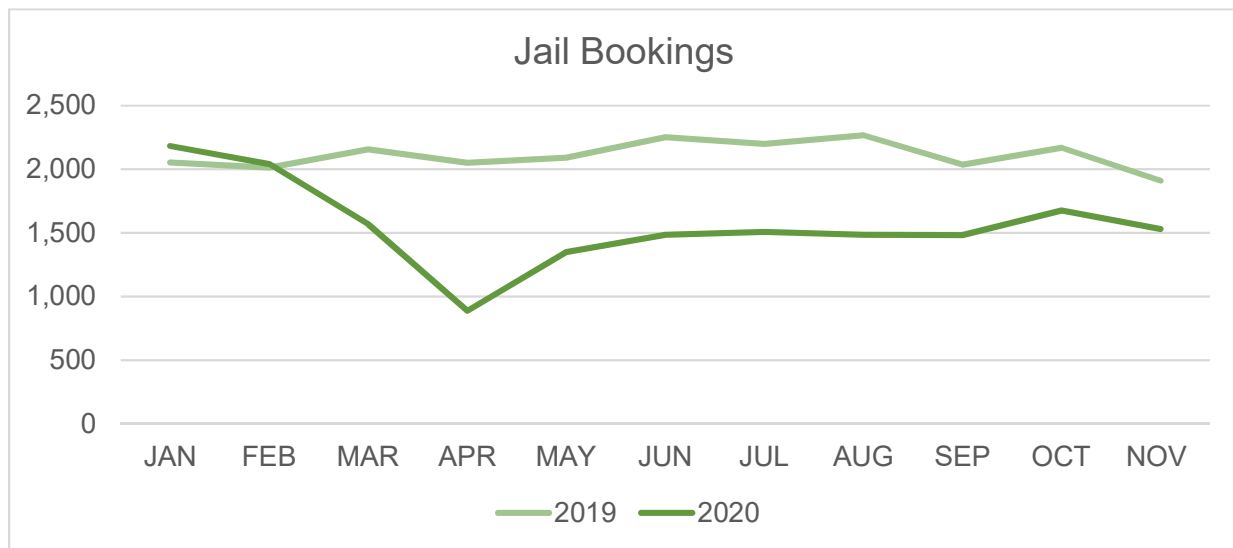
## LAW ENFORCEMENT

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### ***Sedgwick County Jail***

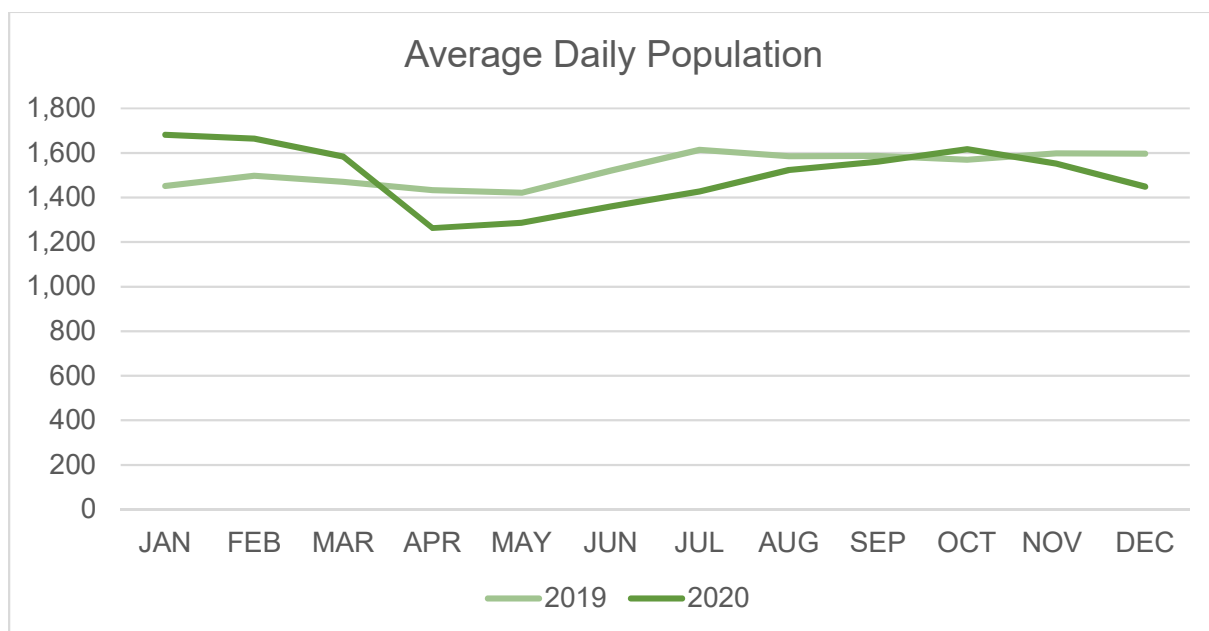
Bookings in the Sedgwick County jail were about 25 percent (25.8%) lower in 2020 than in 2019. The number fell sharply in March and April 2020, as the first wave of COVID spread into the county. Sedgwick County conducted mass COVID-19 testing of inmates. As of the end of November 2020, the jail has had 928 inmates test positive for COVID. To combat the spread, jails across the nation have been committing to early releases, reduced admissions, unnecessary face-to-face contact and mask requirements (2020, Prison Policy Initiative).

**Chart 3.1: Sedgwick County Jail**



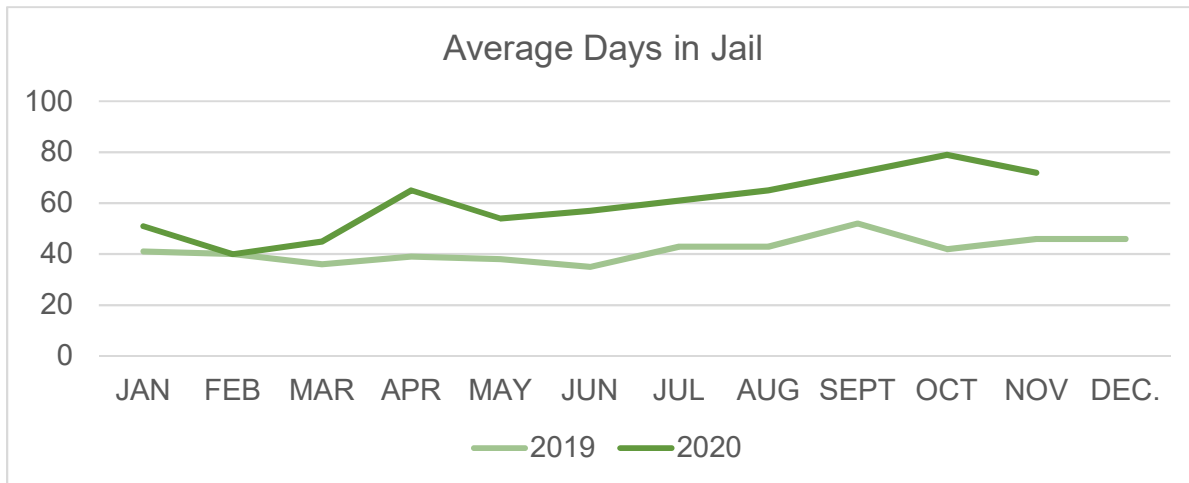
The average daily population in the Sedgwick County jail dropped substantially in March 2020. In response to concerns about COVID spread in congregate settings, the District Attorney’s office reviewed data on inmate charges and allowed inmates with more minor offenses to be released.

**Chart 3.2: Sedgwick County Jail**



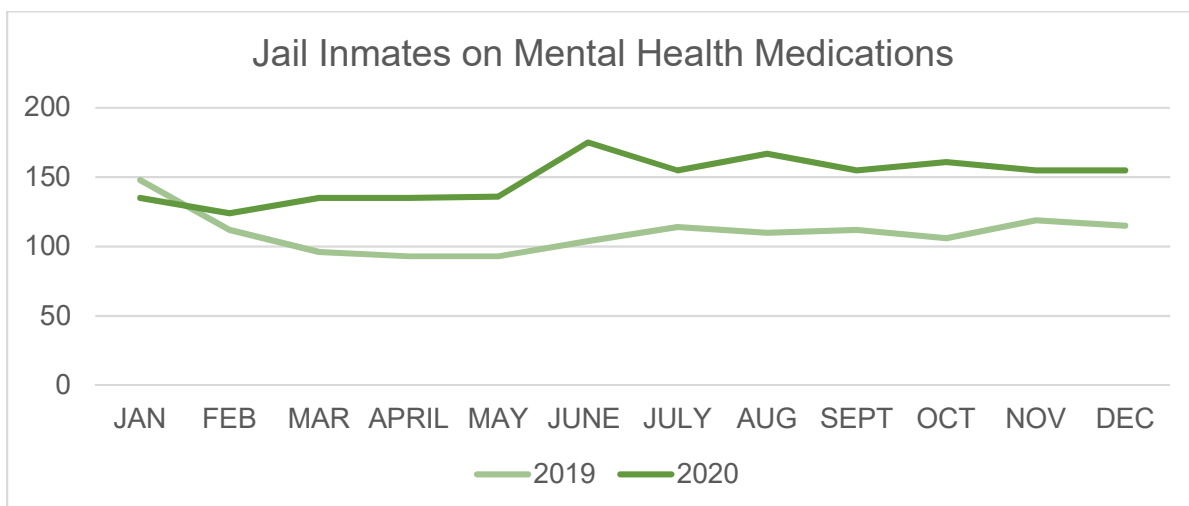
The average length of stay, or number of days in jail, increased in 2020, as courts were closed, and cases were delayed. Inmates in 2019 were in jail for about 42 days, compared to 60 days in 2020.

Chart 3.3: Sedgwick County Jail



Mental Health needs have increased in the jail population. The number of inmates on psychological medications has increased by 35.2 percent between 2019 and 2020. While this growth cannot be solely contributed to COVID, it is reasonable to assume COVID played a part in the need for mental health medicines and support.

Chart 3.4: Sedgwick County Jail



Suicide attempts in jail for 2020 are on track to match 2019 levels. December data is available. Staff report a growing level of stress among inmates. This stress is due, in part, because courts have been closed so inmates' cases are not moving forward, leaving them "stuck" in jail. Because programming has been closed to reduce the spread of COVID, congregate meetings, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and church services, are not available. No outside visitors are allowed inside the jail. Consequently, visits from family or friends are virtual and limited to one free session per week.

Although the jail continues to provide mental health services through its professionals, the limitations in place to protect inmates from COVID contribute to a sense of frustration, isolation and depression. Table 3.0 shows the suicide attempts in the jail. There has been one successful attempt in 2020.

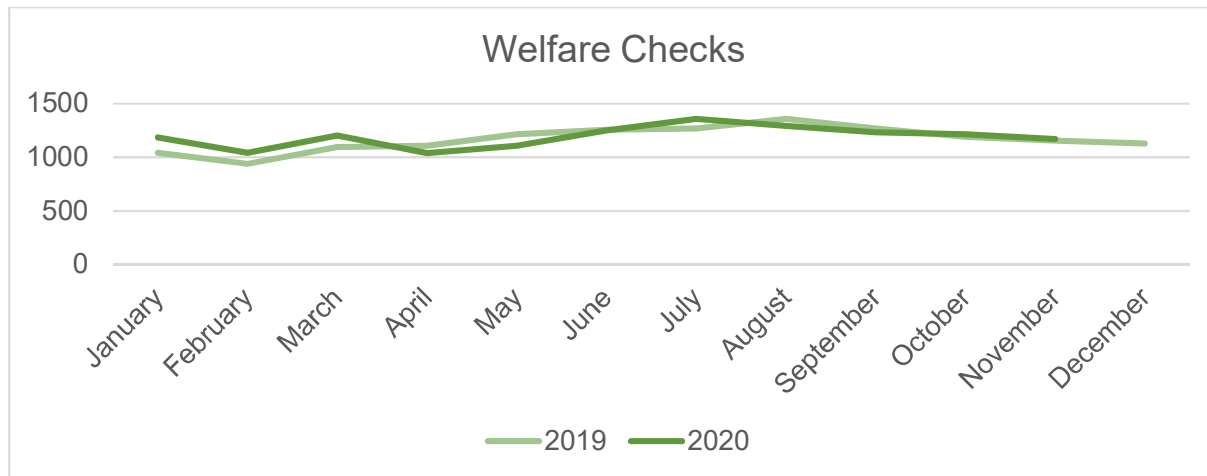
*Table 3.0: Suicide Attempts in Sedgwick County Jail*

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	Total
<b>2019</b>	3	1	9	5	2	6	7	10	5	8	7	2	65
<b>2020</b>	7	2	5	4	5	3	7	6	6	8	6	n.a.	59

### ***Wichita Police Department***

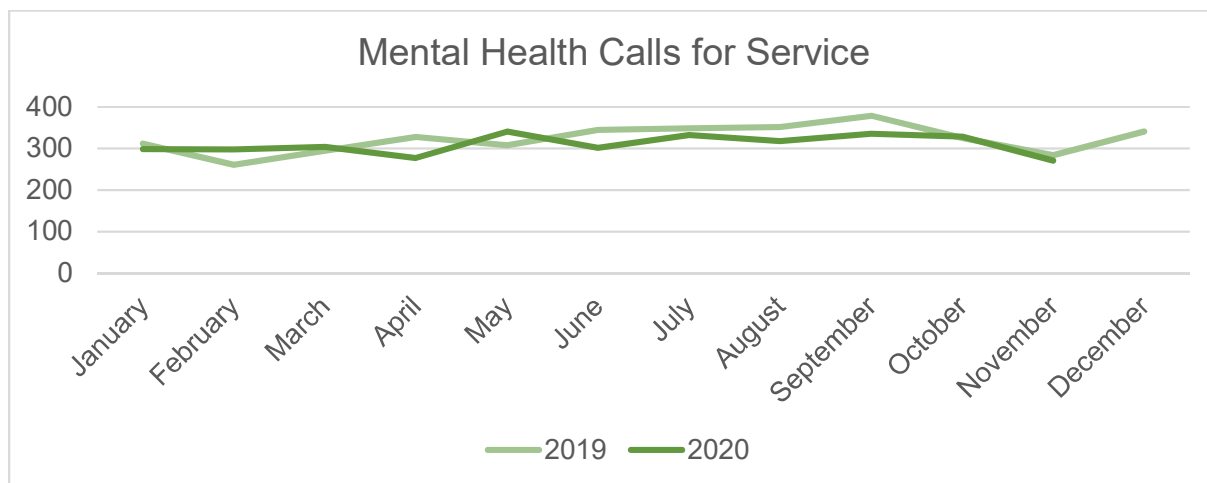
Welfare checks by the Wichita Police Department exceeded 2019 totals in January through March 2020. The number of welfare checks dipped lower than 2020 levels during the first months of the pandemic (March and April) and trended similarly to 2019 totals throughout the rest of 2020.

**Chart 3.5: Wichita Police Department**



In 2020, as the pandemic ramped up in the community mental health calls for police service declined about 16 percent (15.5%) between March and April compared to 2019 levels. With the exception of a 10.7 percent spike in May, calls were consistently below 2019 levels for the remainder of 2020.

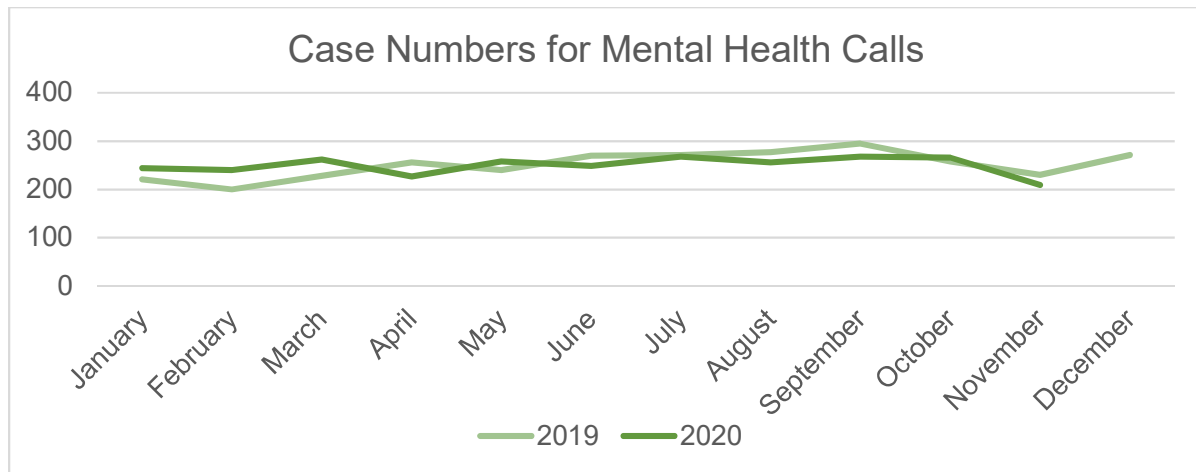
**Chart 3.6: Wichita Police Department**



Service requests that resulted in case numbers mirrored the trends observed in the calls for service, with an 11 percent (11.3%) decrease in March, a slight increase of about 8 percent (7.8%) and slightly below 2019 levels for the remainder of 2020.

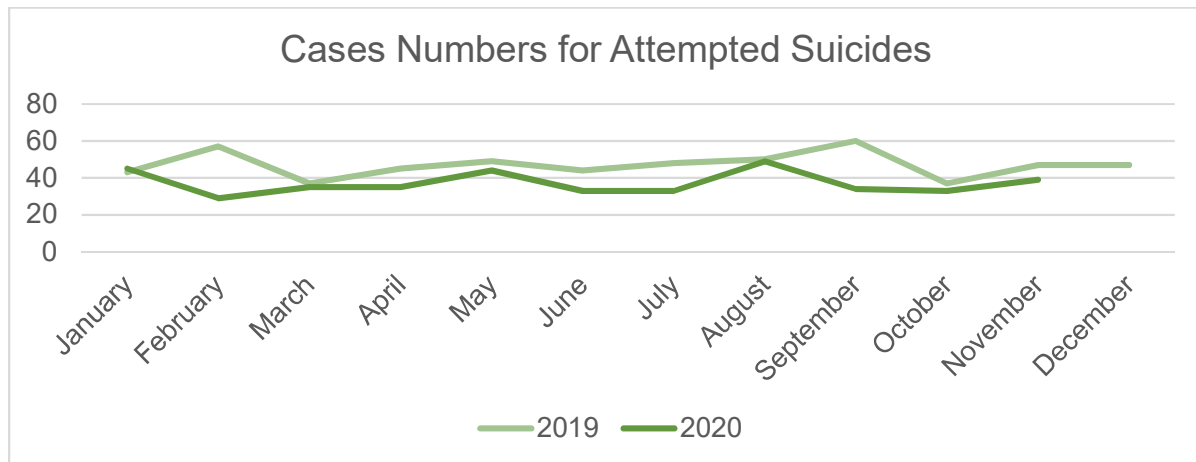


Chart 3.7: Wichita Police Department



Police calls about attempted suicide cases were consistently lower in 2020, averaging about 19.2 percent below 2019 levels.

Chart 3.8: Wichita Police Department

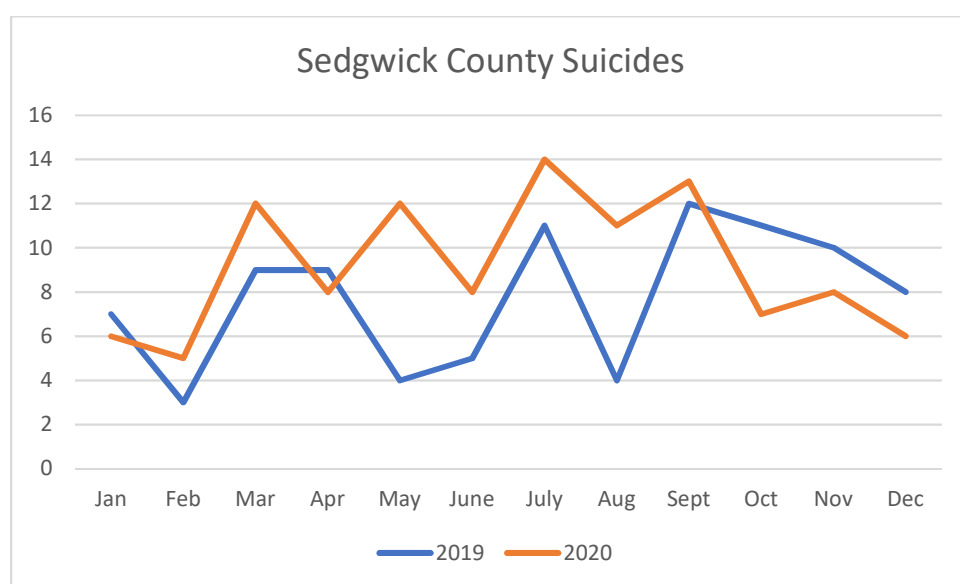


The extreme growth of suicides is alarming. In 2019, there were 59 suicides, compared to 83 in 2020, which doesn't include December 2020 cases. This jump is more than 40 percent (40.7%) over 2019 levels. Mental health professionals are extremely concerned that social isolation and economic strains are leading to fewer people seeking behavioral health services and more suicides.

### ***Sedgwick County Coroner's Office***

The number of suicide cases reported by the Sedgwick County Coroner's office in 2019 was 93 and for 2020 it was 110, an 18 percent increase. However, the coroner's office notes that their case load increased by 18 percent, making the suicides as a percent of total coroner cases stable in 2019 and 2020 at 10.4%. Benchmarking suicides as a percent of population, the 2019 data was 18.3 per 100,000 and in 2020 it was 21.0 per 100,000.

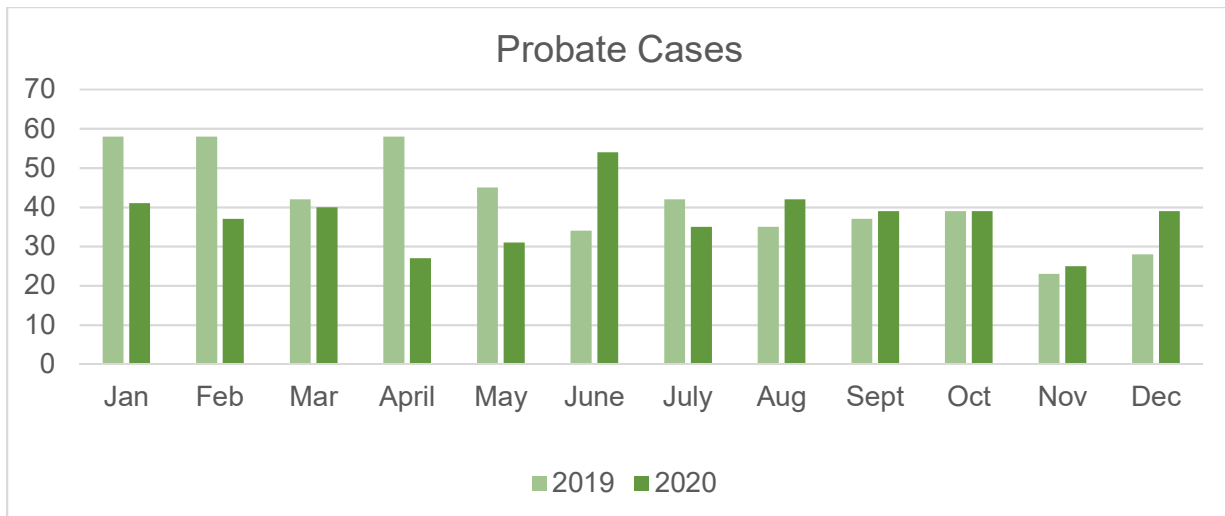
**Chart 3.9: Sedgwick County Coroner's Office**



### ***District Attorney***

Competency evaluations fell 11.5 percent in 2020 (109) compared to 2019 (123) and probate cases fell ten percent (10.0%). Courts were closed due to the pandemic beginning in March and reopened after Memorial Day. Probate cases for 2020 spiked in June and continued to be higher than 2019 averages for August through December.

**Chart 3.10: Sedgwick County District Attorney**



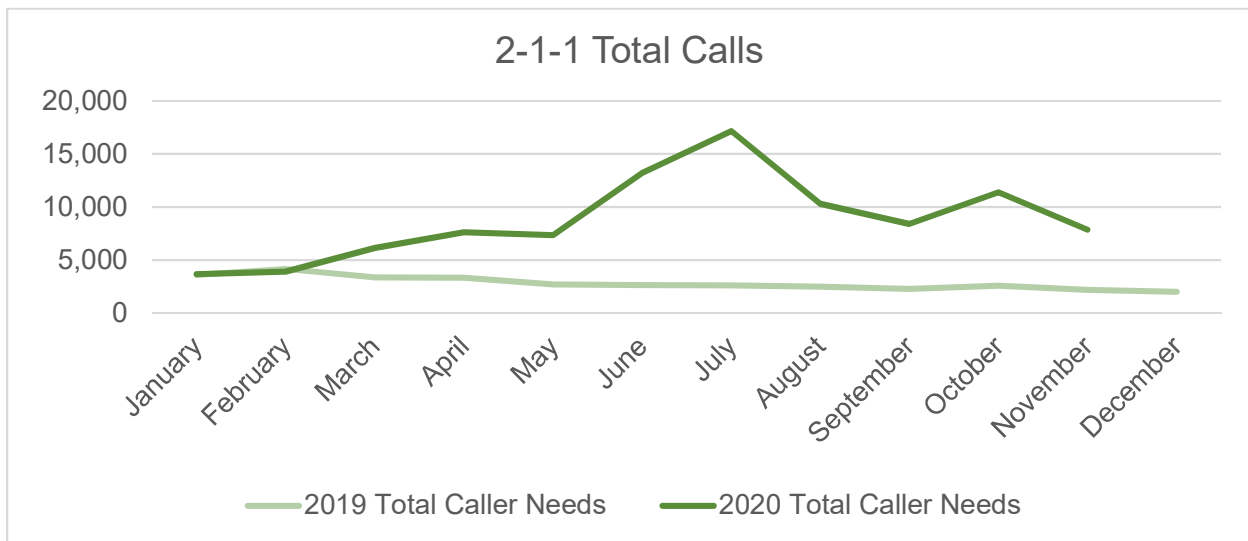
## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AGENCIES

### ***United Way of the Plains 2-1-1 Callers***

Another measure of community stress is the number of calls to United Way’s 2-1-1 service, a free, confidential service that connects callers to a wide range of resources and services across Kansas. The total number of calls to the 2-1-1 phone line has

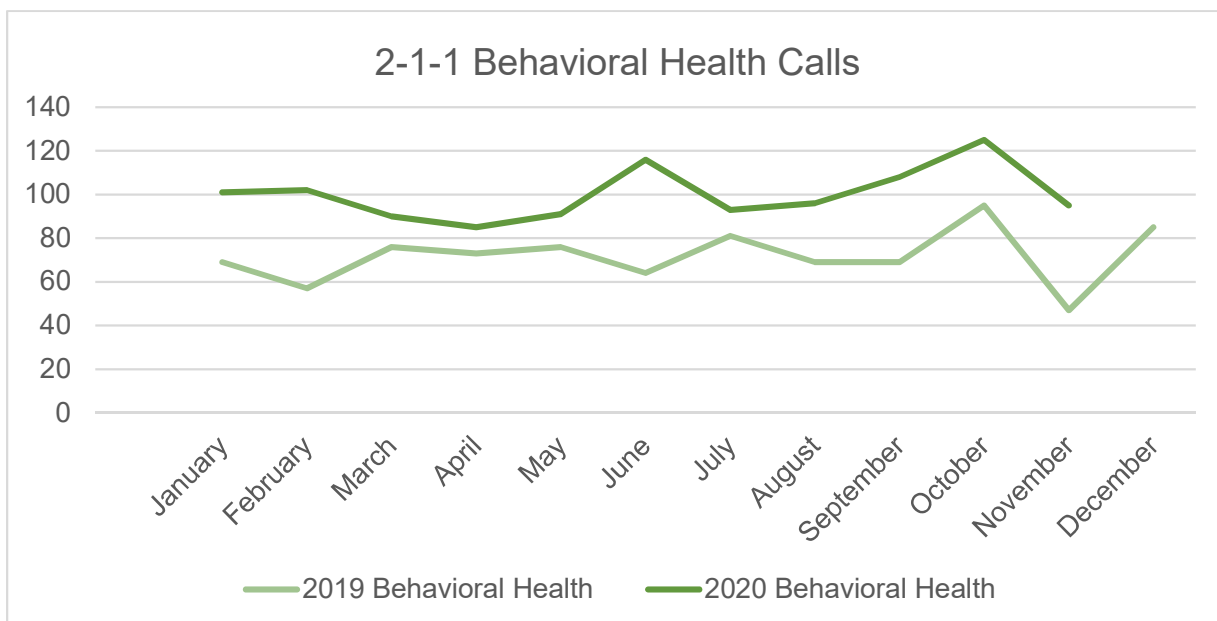
drastically grown by 184 percent in 2020, with the steep rise beginning in March and peaking in July with 17,163 calls.

Chart 4.1: United Way of the Plains



Behavioral health calls have increased by almost 30 percent (27.9%) over 2019 levels. Calls mirror the rise and fall of COVID pandemic levels in Sedgwick County, with peaks in July and October.

Chart 4.2: United Way of the Plains



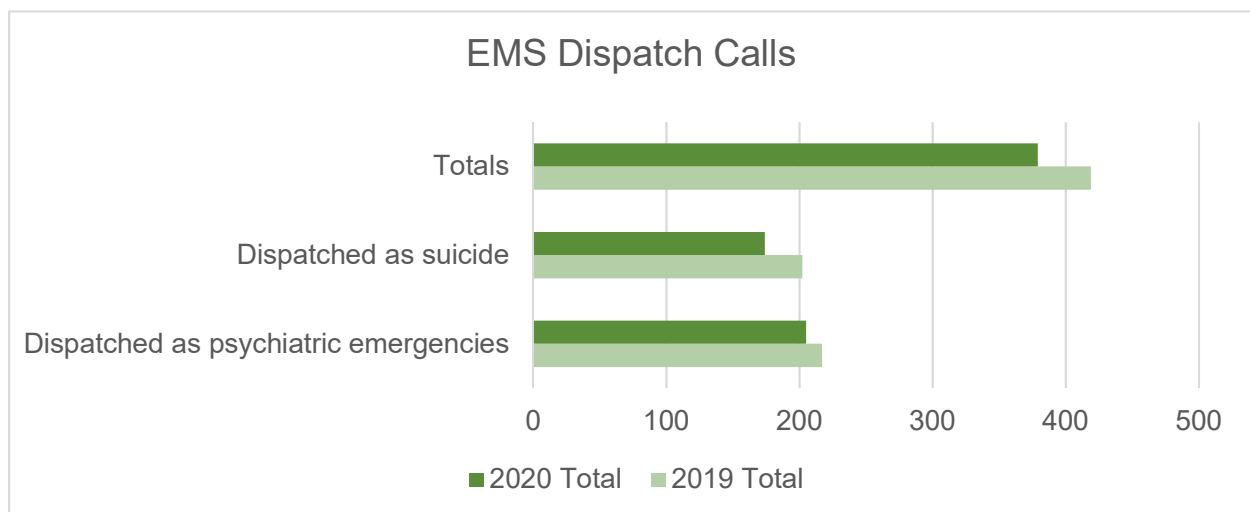


## EMERGENCY Medical SERVICES

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The total number of dispatch calls fell by 9.54% in 2020 as shown in Chart 5.1. This decline may be due in part to reluctance to seek help or go to hospital emergency rooms for fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus.

Chart 5.1: Sedgwick County Emergency Medical Services

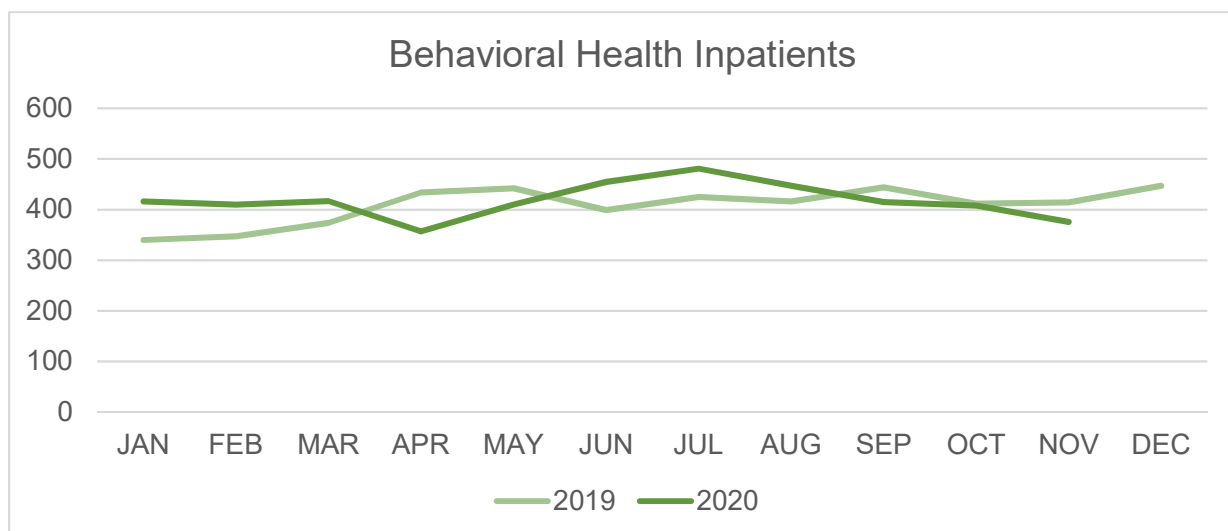


### ***Ascension Via Christi***

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) over 40 percent of adults reported struggling with mental health or substance use disorders. “During June 24–30, 2020, U.S. adults reported considerably elevated adverse mental health conditions associated with COVID-19. Younger adults, racial/ethnic minorities, essential workers, and unpaid adult caregivers reported having experienced disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance use, and elevated suicidal ideation” (Czeisler, Lane, Petrosky, et al., 2020).

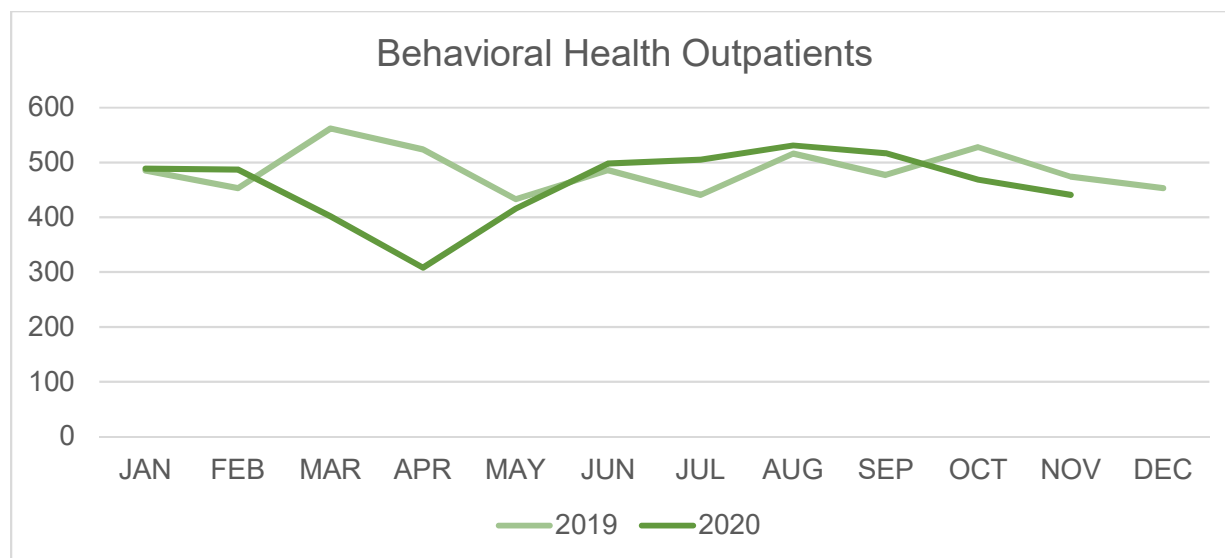
Despite reports of higher incidents of behavioral health problems, the number of behavioral health inpatients in 2020 fell sharply below 2019 in March and April when the pandemic shut-downs began. Inpatients increased over 2019 levels during the summer and dropped off as local cases of Covid began to spike again in September and October.

**Chart 5.2: Ascension Via Christi Hospital**



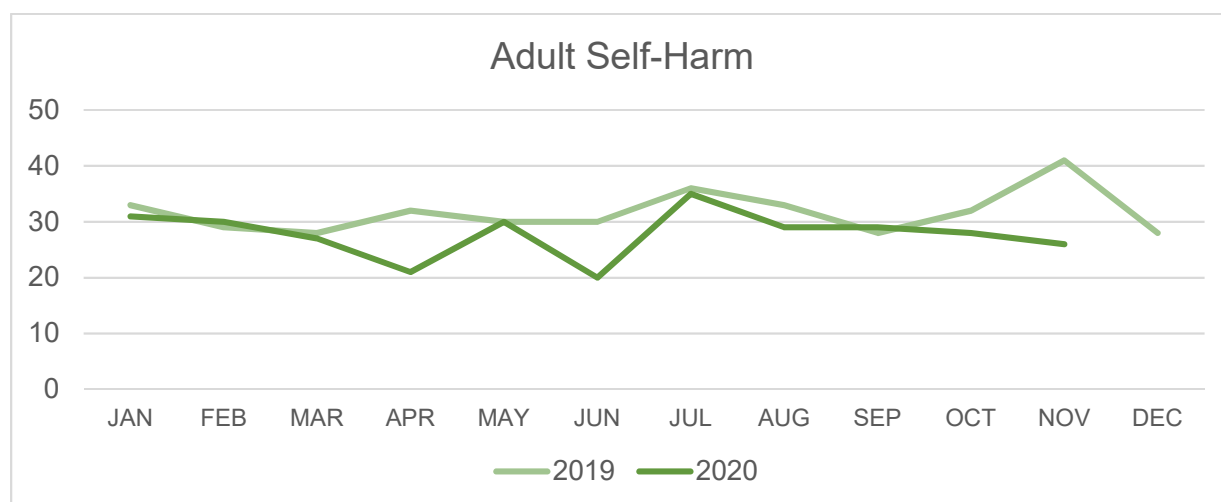
Behavioral health outpatients experienced the same trend as inpatients, but with more volatility. Outpatients in 2020 dropped severely in March and April as shut-downs occurred and patients were moved to tele-health options. Outpatients lagged 2019 levels in the fall, as COVID numbers increased in Sedgwick County.

Chart 5.3: Ascension Via Christi Hospital



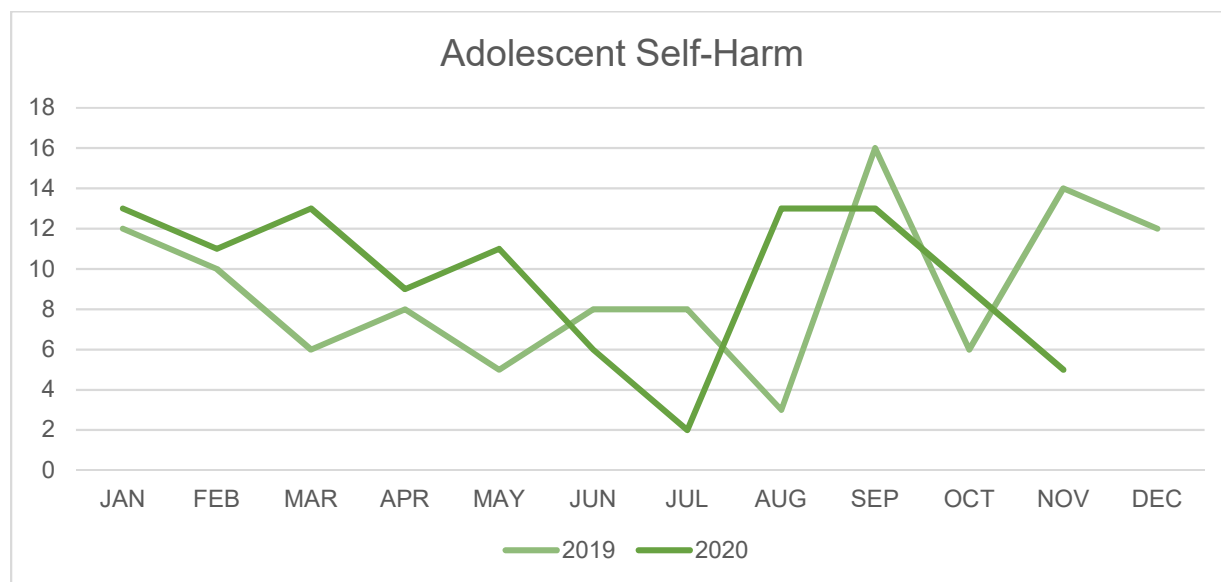
Adult self-harm patients in 2020 and 2019 were consistent in January and February, but when the pandemic occurred in March, the number of self-harm patients dropped significantly in April and again in June. As the patient numbers trended downward through 2020, there is concern that fewer adults are seeking help at the hospital due to fear of contracting COVID-19. In addition, the loss of employer covered health insurance may also make adults less likely to seek mental health services.

Chart 5.4: Ascension Via Christi Hospital



In 2020, adolescent self-harm cases for eleven months (January – November data) totaled 103, compared to the annual total of 108 in 2019. In May through July, the steep decline in cases may be the result of school closing and adolescents having less contact with teachers and service professionals who may identify adolescents that need help.

**Chart 5.5: Ascension Via Christi Hospital**



### ***COMCARE of Sedgwick County***

COMCARE is the local mental health authority for Sedgwick County and provides the safety net for individuals in need of mental health services. In 2020, COMCARE provided 103,997 services compared to the 2019 level of 157,370 services. The number of patients seeking and receiving services declined by over 50 percent (51.3%) compared to 2019 levels.

As the pandemic intensified and shutdowns began, COMCARE was successful in mobilizing and transitioning patients to telehealth services. In 2020, telehealth services ramped up in the spring (February-April) and through the remainder of the year, mirrored swings in the community percentage of COVID-19 cases due to the ability to treat clients in a face-to-face setting.



Chart 5.6: COMCARE of Sedgwick County

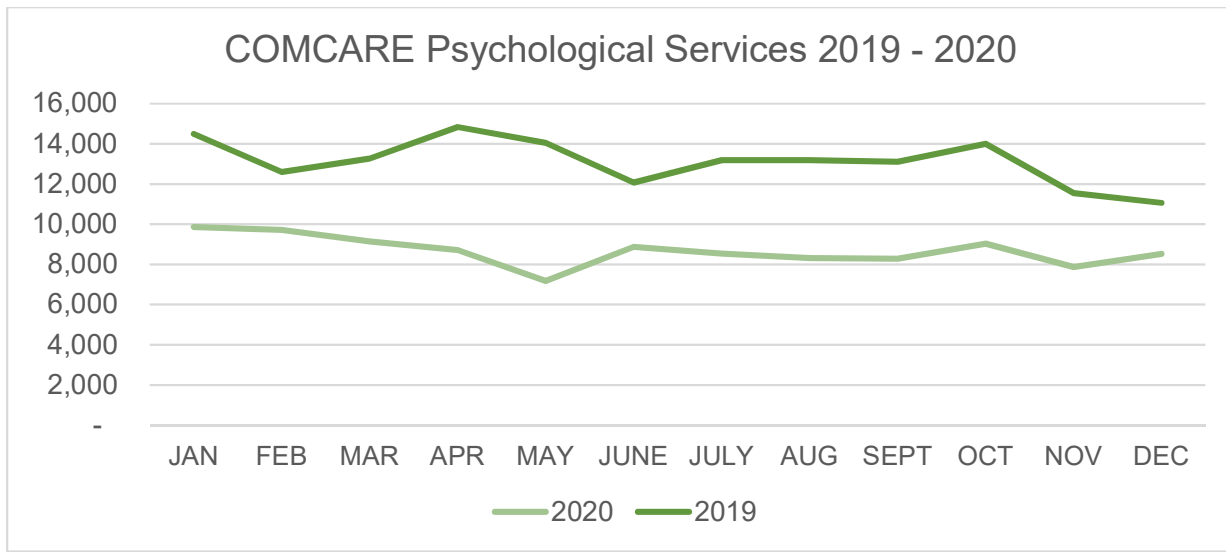
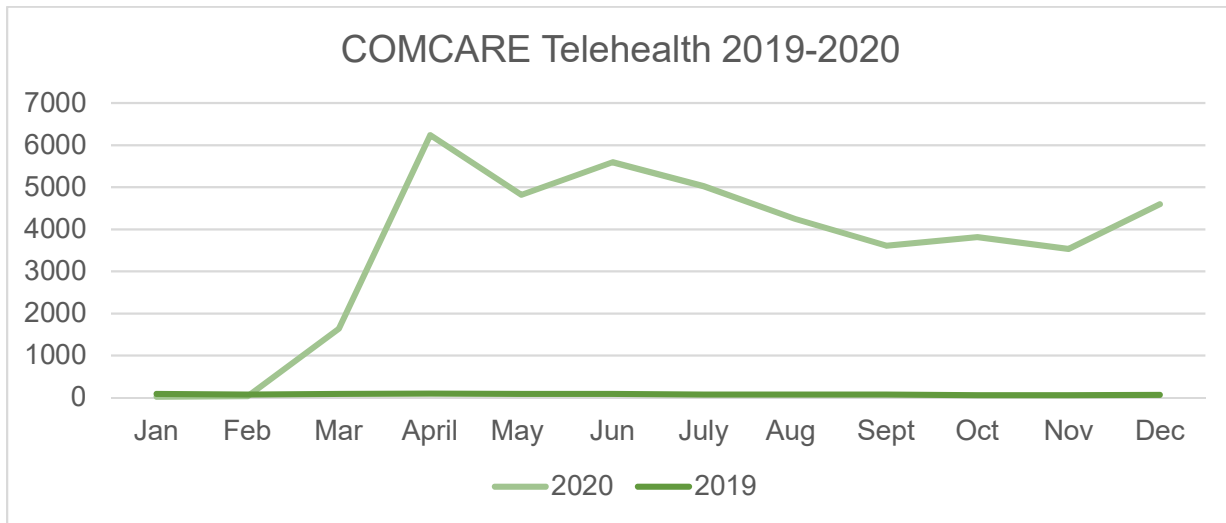
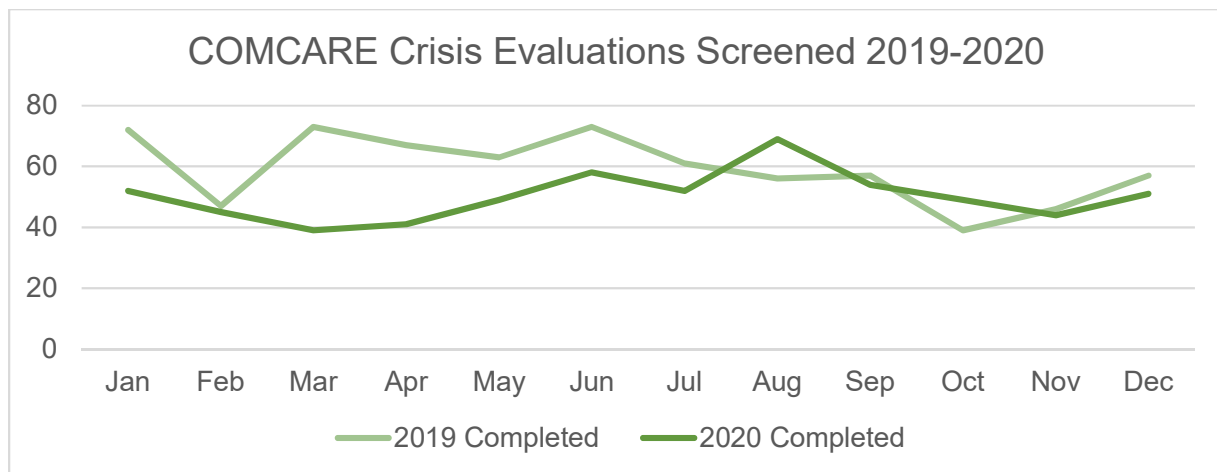


Chart 5.7 COMCARE of Sedgwick County



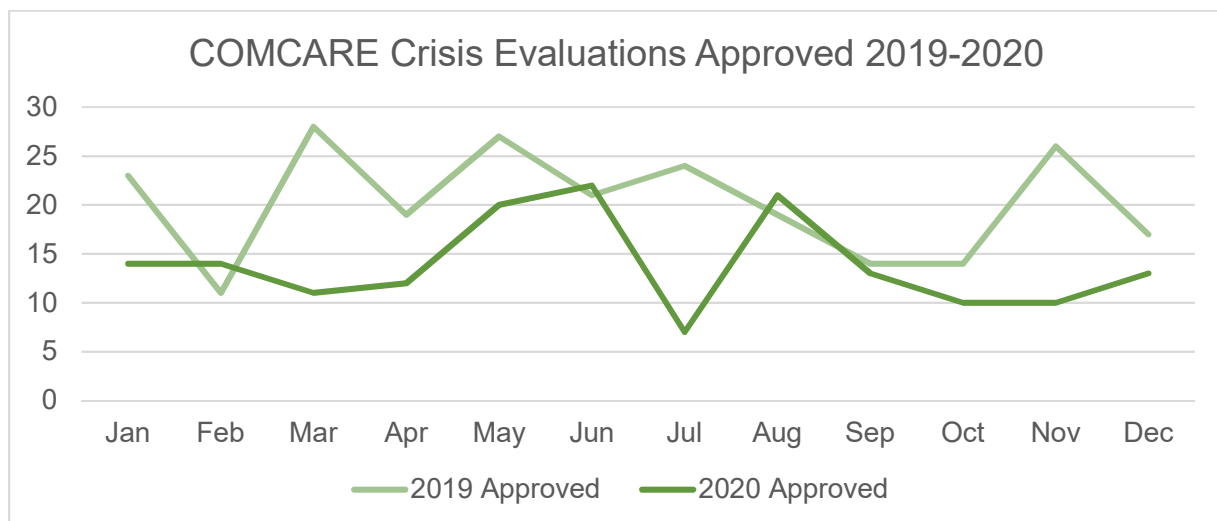
Crisis evaluation screenings dropped to 603 in 2020, compared to 711 in 2019, a 15.1 percent decline. With the exception of August, screenings were consistently lower every month in 2020, compared to 2019.

Chart 5.8 COMCARE of Sedgwick County



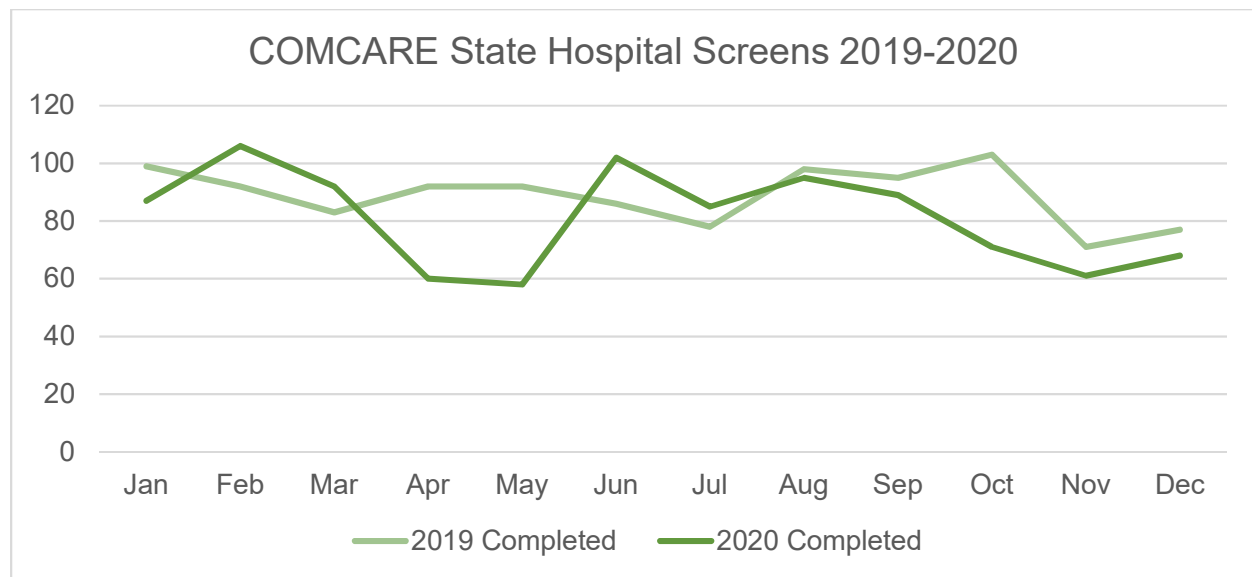
Approved crisis evaluations showed significant volatility in both 2019 and 2020. However, in 2020, only 167 were approved, compared to 243 in 2019, a 31.2 percent decline.

Chart 5.9 COMCARE of Sedgwick County

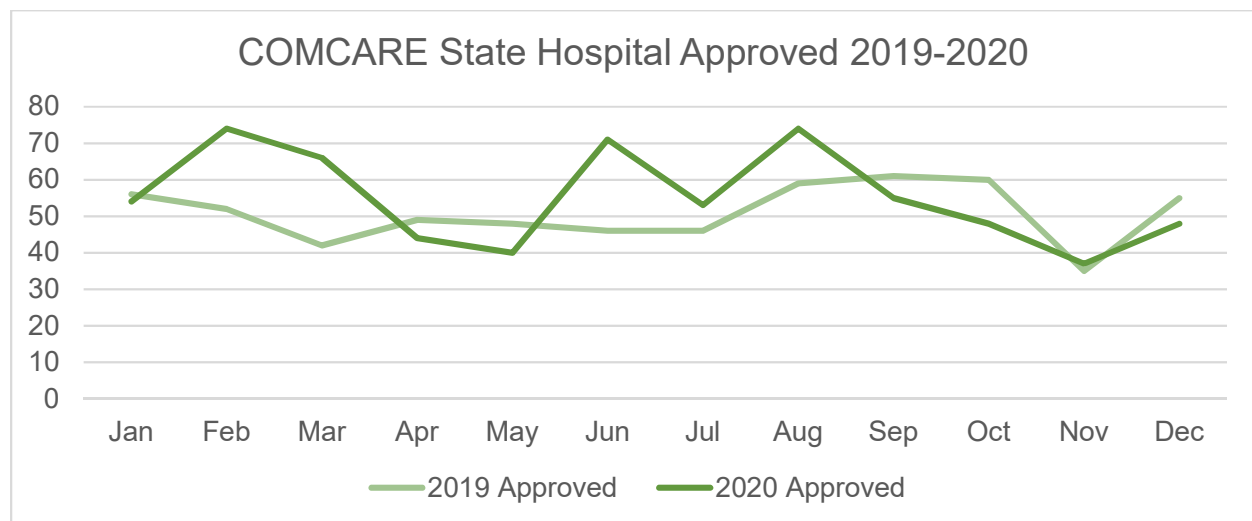


Comparing 2020 to 2019, state hospital screenings fell 8.6 percent from 1066 to 974. Despite the decline in screenings, 664 individuals were approved for state hospital treatment in 2020, compared to 609 in 2019, a 9.0% increase.

**Chart 5.10: COMCARE of Sedgwick County**



**Chart 5.11: COMCARE of Sedgwick County**



***KVC Wichita – Children’s Psychiatric Hospital***

KVC Hospitals Wichita opened in July 2019 with a soft launch and over several months worked to increase its census. Currently, data was not determined to be accurate in comparing 2019 and 2020.



## HOUSING AND SHELTER

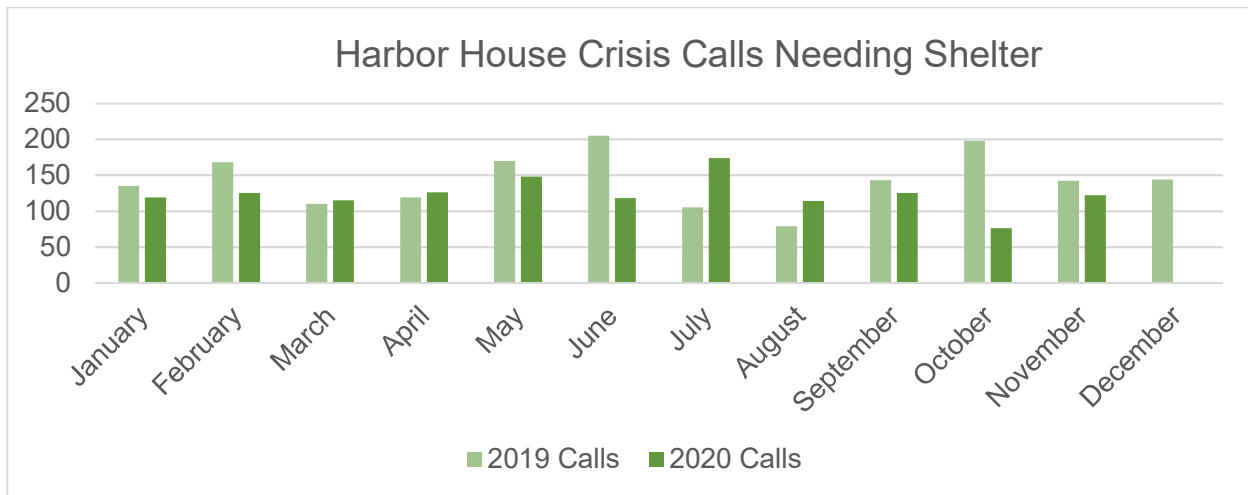
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### ***Catholic Charities Harbor House***

Harbor House provides emergency shelter services for domestic violence victims. They also provide outreach services, including court advocacy, extended community-based case management, and a support program for survivors. Harbor House reports a total of 228 individuals (adult survivors and children) from 135 households received emergency shelter in 2019 compared to 189 clients from 99 households in 2020.

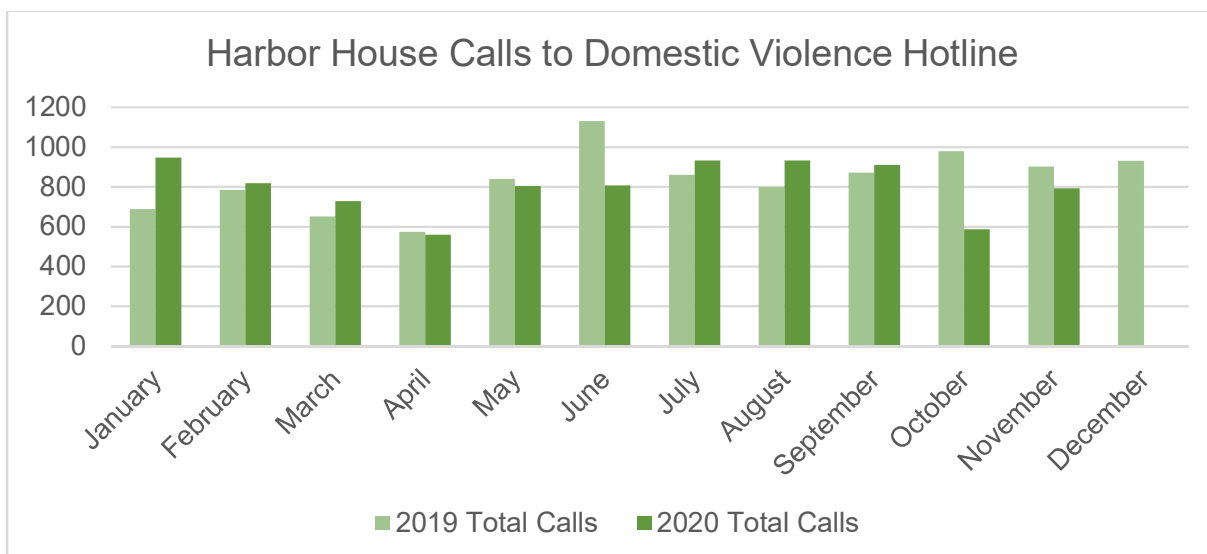
The monthly average of total clients at Harbor House in 2019 was 55 individuals, with an average of 25 adult survivors. In 2020, the monthly average at the shelter was 40 individuals with 18 adult survivors. In 2020, survivors and their families needed a longer time in shelter. The average length of stay in 2019 was 40.3 days and in 2020 the average extended to 46.5 days.

Chart 6.1: Harbor House



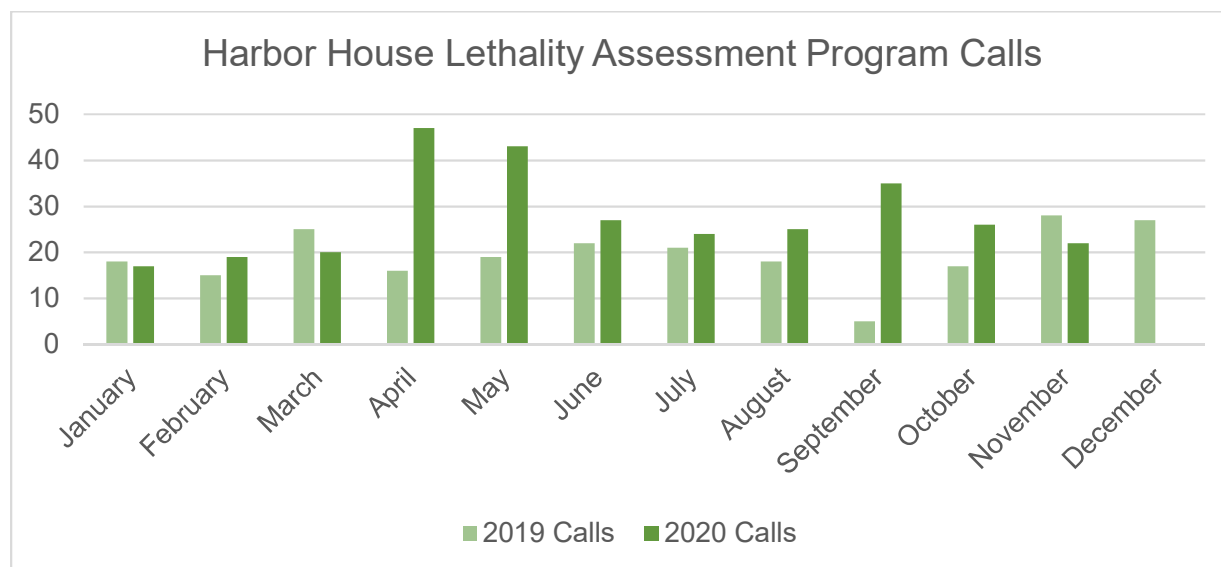
Harbor House reports call volume for the Domestic Violence hotline was fairly stable between 2019 and 2020. The monthly average of calls in 2019 was 834 compared to an average of 801 in 2020. There was a slight decrease in the monthly average of domestic violence calls that were crisis calls, where clients needed shelter (average of 143 in 2019 decreased to 124 in 2020). Counselors note that some of this decrease may be because the abuser has lost a job and remains in the home, making it more difficult for the victim to reach out for services.

Chart 6.2: Harbor House



In April and May of 2020, as the pandemic numbers climbed, the number of calls for the Lethality Assessment Program (LAP) doubled. LAP calls occur when law enforcement, who are on-site with a domestic violence victim, determine that the victim's lethality risk is high in their present situation. The monthly average for LAP calls increased by 47 percent between 2019 and 2020.

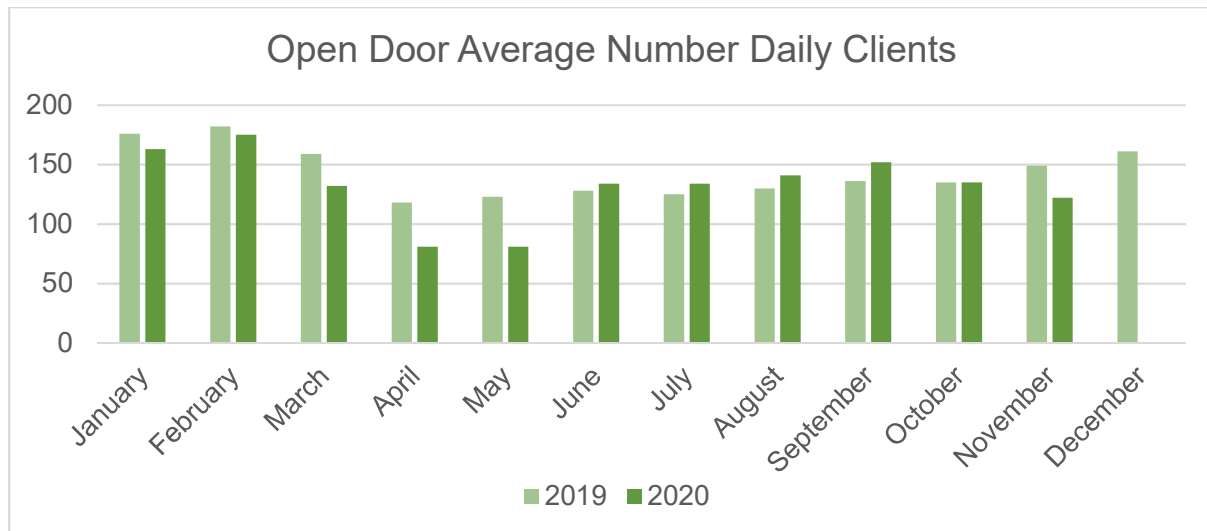
**Chart 6.3: Harbor House**



***United Methodist Open Door***

Open Door reports their average number of daily clients fell in February through May of 2020, compared to 2019. Restrictions on congregant settings and other pandemic mitigation efforts reduce capacity of the shelter during peak pandemic months.

**Chart 6.4; Open Door**



### ***Union Rescue Mission***

Data requested but not received.

### ***Humankind***

The Inn operates 365 days a year, typically providing shelter for up to 60 individuals per night. Due to COVID-19, capacity is currently at 39 per night. In 2020, The Inn sheltered 523 unduplicated individuals, compared to 2019, with 482 unduplicated individuals.

The Emergency Winter Shelter is a nightly shelter that operates from November 1<sup>st</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup>. However, in 2020 the shelter extended operations and closed May 31, 2020. In 2020, 788 unduplicated individuals were served (Jan, Feb, March, April, May, Nov and Dec), compared to 890 (Jan, Feb, March, Nov and Dec) in 2019. An average of 56 individuals were sheltered nightly in 2020 compared to 88 individuals in 2019.



## CONCLUSION

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Community agencies continue to adapt services to meet the needs of citizens. Most agencies reduced services in March through May of 2020 as they struggled to make adaptations, such as convert in-person services to virtual. Pandemic mitigation efforts, coupled with economic and social stress, make it problematic for some agencies to identify and serve clients, particularly the vulnerable populations of elderly and children. In addition, more information is needed about the impact of mental health challenges faced by healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an area that should be explored and reflected on to learn from this experience and to strengthen the community mental health providers after care.

There is a need to continue to collect and analyze data to determine the impact of interventions, such as tele-medicine and remote education, and to identify new opportunities for services. In addition, development of integrated data systems would make data collection more efficient, allowing agencies to collaborate and respond in a strategic and timely manner.



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