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Ag communities lacking in mental health services

By Christie Netherton Messenger-Inquirer
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Michele Mitchell

Michele Mitchell, a family nurse practitioner in Hancock County, hopes to provide mental health services that specifically focus on the mental health needs of farmers and agricultural communities.

Mitchell, a family nurse practitioner for around 10 years, is studying at Western Kentucky University to receive a certification as a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner, with a special focus on mental health in agricultural communities.

Mitchell graduates in August and plans to continue practicing in Hancock County, where she said there is a need for mental health services, especially those that cater to the farming community.

“It really is such an underserved area,” she said. “We don’t have enough providers to see all those patients.”

Mitchell was recently awarded the Women’s Educational Grant by the Kentucky Farm Bureau, which is presented annually to a female nontraditional student who is interested in resuming her education after leaving school to fulfill either family or work-related responsibilities.

Mitchell said as a family nurse practitioner, she has seen a significant increase in depression, anxiety and other mood disorders, but it can often take months for patients to get an appointment to see a therapist or mental health provider once they’re referred.

That increase in mental health problems and the shortage of mental health providers in the community, along with her husband’s farming background, she said, is what inspired her to continue her education

and specialize in mental health and rural health care.

Farmers, she said, have a unique set of stressors each year that contribute to their overall mental wellbeing, which can fluctuate with how the market is doing and how their crop is fairing.

Those specific needs, she said, call for someone uniquely trained in what individuals in agricultural and rural communities deal with in their daily lives that affect their mental health state.

“They would understand all the stress that comes with farming and how that can contribute to suicide rates,” she said.

Farmers, she said, have a large burden on them to ensure food needs are met each year.

“I think a lot of times, people don’t realize how much farmers do and how much they contribute,” she said. “We have to have them to make things run.”

While these problems have always been prevalent, Mitchell said, there has been a spotlight on them in the past several years, and especially during COVID-19, when food has been scarce at times, and an even more significant burden has been placed on farmers to ensure food is hitting tables in their communities.

“I do think it’s coming more to the surface with education,” she said. “These days we place more of an emphasis and more of a spotlight on mental health and bring more of those things to the surface, whereas before it was more of a taboo thing to talk about.”

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