Dhara Meghani, PhD, has spent years working with children, pregnant women and new mothers, learning about how their backgrounds can affect their development as parents. But after giving birth to her first child, she saw first-hand how new parents’ demanding schedules keeps them from getting the mental health support they need. And for some new moms, the need is great for mental health care: About one in nine women experience symptoms of postpartum depression, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In response to that need, in 2016 Meghani joined colleague and fellow new mom Paulina Barahona, MS, to create Parentline San Francisco, a free telebehavioral health service specifically for new parents, based out of the University of San Francisco (USF) clinical psychology program where Meghani is an assistant professor and core faculty member.

“We were wondering how we could provide a service that is accessible to new parents—because it’s so hard to get out the door and have regular therapy appointments—that is also brief and solutions focused,” Meghani says. “Parents have a hard time coming to us, but we could go to them through telemental health services.”

Pediatricians and pediatric nurses direct patients—usually new parents who are worried about their babies’ behaviors or who are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety—to call the Parentline voicemail number. Then, within 24 hours, USF psychology doctoral students return the calls and schedule times parents can speak with a clinician, either via phone or Zoom, a web video conferencing platform that is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

Grants from the USF Jesuit foundation, USF Faculty Development Fund and the American Psychological Association have funded the program’s development, promotion and research efforts.

The USF program caught the attention of Tracy Vozar, PhD, director of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Specialty at the University of Denver, so she worked with Meghani to launch Parentline Colorado at the university in December 2019.

“Twenty-two counties in Colorado do not have a licensed psychologist and many prospective clients live in rural or mountainous regions. This is a great opportunity to provide services to folks who maybe thought they wanted to come in for therapy, but for a variety of reasons it’s harder for them to come into the clinic,” says Vozar.

Parentline Colorado is also free for patients, paid for by a grant for the first year. In future years, the program will offer sliding-fee schedules and allow patients to use Medicaid.

And like the patients, the doctoral students and clinicians participating in Parentline enjoy the same flexibility benefits that telehealth services provide.

“Psychologists, we have a tendency to think about our clinical appointments being one time a week, 50 minutes long, but when you’re offering these services on Zoom or over the phone there is an option to really be flexible in a way that’s helpful rather than hindering,” Vozar says. She adds that the doctoral trainees love being able to offer Parentline services from anywhere, as long as they have access to good WiFi and are in a location that guarantees privacy and confidentiality.

Barahona says the next steps for Parentline include sharing some of the data they’ve been collecting on new parent experiences and possibly launching Parentline in more areas.

For more information about Parentline, visit parentlineusf.com.

University of Denver’s CUB Clinic website provides more information about Parentline Colorado: du.edu/gspp/services/cub/index.html