

Times-Standard

County expanding mental health services

Jessie Faulkner/The Times-Standard

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A voter-approved tax on the state's millionaires is helping Humboldt County increase its services to the mentally ill.

Plans for the expansion of the county's mental health services with the Mental Health Service Act revenue has been in the works since the initiative passed in 2005 and was implemented in 2006.

Earlier this month, the Board of Supervisors authorized the addition of 21 full-time positions and five part-time positions to the Mental Health Branch. Among those are mental health aides, case managers, clinicians, senior program managers, psychiatric nurses, an assistant director of psychiatric nursing, a supervising mental health clinician and two custodians.

At the heart of that expansion is a holistic and integrative approach to providing services for those dealing with mental health issues.

Mental Health Branch Director Karolyn Rim Stein has been overseeing the staff expansion that was approved unanimously at the Board of Supervisors Aug. 5 meeting.

At the time, 1st District Supervisor Jimmy Smith expressed his concern that some of the funds should be allotted to heightening services for jail inmates. Part of the concern, Smith said Friday, is

dealing with those in custody who have dual diagnoses of mental illness and substance abuse.

Department of Health and Human Services Director Phil Crandall said at the supervisors meeting that Humboldt County has one of the highest mental health staffing levels in a correctional facility,

but is working against a state trend to reduce services while people are in law enforcement custody.

Meanwhile, use of the Mental Health Services Act will allow the county to focus on expanding prevention and early intervention efforts.

In the Mental Health Services Act's first year, Rim Stein said, the revenue reached \$253.8 million statewide. In the 2007-08 fiscal year, which ended June 30, the act tallied \$1.5 billion -- a figure that's protected for the current fiscal year as well, Rim Stein said.

Mental Health Board member Marianne Pennekamp stressed that the staff allotments approved earlier this month are not really new positions, but restaffing ones left vacant over the years due to a lack of state funding.

One of the immediate goals for allocating Humboldt County's share of the revenue, Rim Stein said, is to reach out to rural areas -- both the unserved and underserved. To that end, the branch has purchased two large recreational vehicles to bring services to Garberville, Redway, Willow Creek, Orick and other areas.

"The plan is to bring mobile health and human services to rural communities," Rim Stein said.

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That includes all portions of the Department of Health and Human Services from social service offerings to public health nursing.

The county had already been operating a homeless outreach van to provide services in the outlying areas for a number of years, she said.

One of the implementing features of the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act, Rim Stein said, is seeking input from the stakeholders – the mentally ill clientele, their families, the education community, law enforcement, health care providers and others.

Bringing services to the unserved or underserved areas of the county was one of the first priorities established when staff began planning implementation of programs funded through the Mental Health Services Act. When services are provided closer to home, those in need are more likely to take advantage of them.

"Rural outreach is very important," Rim Stein said.

The county's Comprehensive Community Treatment (CCT) program will also see a significant boost. CCT, described as an intensive case management and clinical services program, has already made measurable strides.

Between January and July of this year, staff efforts have helped cut the number of mentally ill adults in locked, skilled nursing facilities by more than 50 percent. In January, there were 24; by July just 15 remained in those facilities.

These are the patients, Rim Stein said, who are not ill enough to warrant being in a locked facility but are not well enough to live independently. The goal

is to find a safe way for them to live in the community – often in supervised facilities.

The state funds will also help expand services at the Hope Center – a program run by those successfully managing their mental illnesses. The hope, Rim Stein said, is that with assistance those battling the challenges of mental illness will be able to do more than just be a person with a mental illness – they'll be functioning community members, as others do despite chronic illnesses.

The program, centered in a double-wide mobile home on the grounds of the Clark Complex, sees an average of 100 visitors a day attending support groups, seeking assistance with services, preparing for employment, or just hanging out in a comfortable location.

Some of the five part-time mental health aides and two full-time mental health aides funded through the Mental Health Services Act will be assigned to expand the center's services.

The key is providing real-life examples of successfully living with mental illness, Rim Stein said.

The Mental Health Services Act money is used to educate officers on the best ways to deal with mental health patients. The trainings had been in the planning for about a year prior to the April 14, 2006, shooting death of Cheri Lyn Moore in Eureka.

The first session was held that fall and the fourth session is scheduled for Oct. 21-24.

So far, Rim Stein said, 120 people have been trained with an average of 40 participants per session. The result, she said, has been a whole new

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understanding between law enforcement and mental health.

"We and they are really the first line in the community for folks who are mentally ill," she said.

The next phase of the Mental Health Services Act program includes working to prevent discrimination toward those suffering from mental illness -- with considerable input from community members, Rim Stein said.

The Mental Health Board will be assisting in that effort, she said.

The county staff will also be focusing efforts on suicide prevention -- Humboldt County is among the top 10 California counties in suicide rates -- and working with young adults showing the first symptoms of mental illness.

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