

Mental health a growing concern on South Shore

By Kathryn Reed

Mental health issues are a problem for educators, law enforcement, medical professionals and others. The illness tends to permeate nearly every facet of the population and not always in ways that are obvious.

When Barton Health conducted its Community Health Needs Assessment in 2012 mental health was one of the three priorities that needed to be addressed. Access to care and substance abuse rounded out the top concerns. (Barton is in the process of doing its second needs assessment.)

“Mental Health is multi-faceted, so there is not a quick or simple answer. Ideally having options for prevention, maintenance and acute crisis during different developmental phases would help support people when they need that support,” Kindle Craig, executive director of Barton Health Foundation, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Mental health can be difficult to treat because of limited funding and facilities, especially in an area like Lake Tahoe because it is nowhere near a metropolitan area that has more resources.

“The adult populations experiencing the greatest barriers to mental health care in El Dorado County, and particularly in South Lake Tahoe, include low-income populations, the Hispanic community, ex-offenders, homeless and co-morbid mental health and substance addicted adults. According to the patient panel of the county Mental Health Division, dual-diagnosis patients (mental illness and substance abuse) comprise approximately 80 percent of the population served, and the county has reported an increase in the number of youth with this dual diagnosis,”

the mental health assessment concluded.

Law enforcement is often interacting with people who are mentally unstable. It's an issue South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler regularly brings up. He did so again at Saturday's strategic planning workshop – saying more resources are needed and attention paid to mental illness in the community.

“A February 2012 report to the California Department of Health Care Services indicated that approximately 5 percent of the El Dorado County population needed mental health services based upon the serious mental illness definition. Within households below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, this rate increased to approximately 9 percent. When a broader definition of mental health needs is utilized, the percent of population that had a need for mental health services increased to approximately 12 percent of the population, and within households below 200 percent FPL, the need increased to approximately 20 percent. This indicates that over 21,000 county residents may need mental health services, many of whom are likely not seeking treatment,” the mental health assessment states.

According to the National Institute of Mental Illness, mental disorders affect tens of millions of people each year, with only about half of those affected receiving treatment.

In September 2013 a group came together for the inaugural mental health forum on the South Shore. The next gathering is March 5.

“The goals of the mental health forum are to continue to raise awareness, identify gaps in service/access, and build a community care flow map allowing all parties – caregivers, providers, schools, and first responders – to understand the appropriate pathways for patient access with regard to patient age and insurance coverage,” Craig said.

She said the first forum provided greater understanding by

those who participated of the mental health system, the deficiencies and why they exist.

“A specific positive outcome was developing a way to work across state lines to be able to transport certain patients to appropriate facilities in Nevada, as well as California, depending on the need,” Craig said of the 2013 gathering.

Barton, law enforcement, paramedics, El Dorado County, Lake Tahoe Unified School District and nonprofits were part of the first forum.

Invited to this year’s gathering are: Barton Health, LTUSD, Douglas County School District, Family Resource Center, city and county officials, El Dorado County Mental Health, South Lake Tahoe Police Department, South Lake Tahoe Fire Department, Drug Free Coalition, Lake Tahoe Collaborative, Live Violence Free, Child Protective Services, and others.

Next week’s all-day forum is designed to create achievable goals.

“South Lake Tahoe is in need of a more collaborative, effective approach to addressing mental health. Working cooperatively with the social services agencies and community members is essential to understanding the issues, identifying gaps, and solving problems,” Craig said. “As a healthcare provider, Barton offers an array of medical services including child psychiatry, bereavement counseling, and tele-psychiatry. Patients come to Barton through a variety of access points in need of assistance related to mental health. If it is not a medical need, Barton works with the appropriate agency to refer patients to the best location to receive appropriate services like counseling.”