

S. Tahoe works on solutions for mental health

By Molly Hucklebridge

Change 'I' to 'we' and you go from illness to wellness.

More than 80 mental health clinicians, medical providers, law enforcement, social service groups, and the school district staff attended the mental health forum on March 5. Attendees discussed local mental health issues and walked away with specific plans to improve our community's mental health in the next six months.

Donald Ashton, director of El Dorado County Health and Human Services, started the morning with the "the ugly, the bad, and the good" to describe the state of county mental health services.

According to Ashton, domestic violence in El Dorado County rates $1\frac{1}{2}$ times higher than the state. Suicide rates are double California's rate and substance abuse is high particularly in South Lake Tahoe.

Pregnant women in the county suffer from mental health issues $2\frac{1}{2}$ times more than their state counterparts. Mental health services and substance abuse programs are limited, but more El Dorado County residents suffer from a mental illness than ever before.

In the 2012 Community Health Needs Assessment, Barton Health identified mental health as one of the top three issues in the South Lake Tahoe community. Access to healthcare services and substance abuse, the other top priorities, are closely linked to mental health. As Ashton pointed out, Marshall Hospital's Assessment produced the same results and South Lake Tahoe is not alone.

At the mental health forum, medical providers, law enforcement, social service groups, school district staff, and community members shared their own stories, hopes, and concerns about mental health issues. Attendees discussed professional and personal experiences with every age level, and offered their insights and ideas.

In the afternoon, the insights and ideas were transformed into short-term action items. Sub-groups each had a different age group to focus on and determine key actions and next steps to improve the community's state of mental health in the next six months.

"We all know mental health issues are complex and solutions will take time," explained Michael Ward, the forum's facilitator. "But what steps can we take in the next six months to achieve a victory for mental health?"

Attendees in each age group offered between 10 and 20 action items. Then, within their groups, individuals and agencies committed to specific actions. Some attendees formed teams to execute a plan.

"I am so impressed by the enthusiasm and number of the ideas that came to the table," said Kindle Craig, director of Strategy and Development at the Barton Foundation. "If we accomplished just three of these goals in the next six months – a local mental health services directory, mental health first aid training for all first responders, and the return of NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness) to our community – these services and amenities would make such a difference for our community."

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