

Tahoe social issues top EDC official's talk

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – While many people believe their job runs the gamut, Don Ashton's literally goes from A to Z – animal control to Zika virus.

Ashton is the director of Health and Human Services for El Dorado County. It's the largest department in the county, with about 550 employees. Countywide there are approximately 1,800 workers.

Mental health, homelessness and human trafficking are three of the big issues his department contends with in Tahoe.

Ashton spoke last week at the Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe meeting, of which Supervisor Sue Novasel is a member.



Don Ashton with El Dorado County talks about issues pertaining to Tahoe. Photo/LTN

“With mental health, we are seeing more of a need in Tahoe,”

Ashton said. He mentioned El Dorado County's suicide rate is higher than the state average.

Transitional houses – T houses for short – have been established in the basin to help those with mental issues. Twelve beds are available at the lake; on average 10 are full each night.

“T houses use the treatment model. They have to agree to treatment. It's not just housing,” Ashton explained.

It's less expensive for the county to pay \$500 in rent a month to sleep six than it is to send the person to a board and care facility in Sacramento at a rate of \$15,000 per person.

The beds in Tahoe have only been available since last year. Countywide there are 33 such beds, double the number from two years ago.

“Seventy percent of the people in jail or prison have a mental illness,” Ashton said. When they get out they are in the community, often times without the resources to cope.

One of the positives about Tahoe is the community has come together to try to address some of these needs. He mentioned how CASA is working with Live Violence Free to build a program regarding mental health that will likely be brought to the supervisors. The electeds can then decide about going after grant money to fund the program.

Ashton said the county is moving toward creating a “system of care” so people don't fall through the cracks. He hopes to have it part of the next budget cycle, which the supervisors will be getting under way this spring. The problem now is things are fractionalized and don't come under one umbrella.

For instance, programs for kids and adults are separate, which doesn't help families. The other aspect is the broader community that needs his department's resources. The goal is

to make the agency user-friendlier.

What wasn't brought up at the meeting is how Ashton is being endorsed by various entities to be the next chief administrative officer for the county. This is the highest position. Several electeds **wrote a letter** to the Board of Supervisors earlier this month saying as much.

Last week El Dorado County Superior Court judges Suzanne Kingsbury, Steve Bailey, Keith Brooks, Ken Melikian and Dylan Sullivan sent a similar letter to the board, as did the Taxpayers Association of El Dorado County.

The county has an interim CAO, Larry Combs, whose ability to understand the budget and make good hiring decisions has been questioned by many in the county, and yet he is the one the supervisors put in charge of hiring the next CAO.