Sonoma's mental health hub is a community resource

DANIEL JOHNSON ⋮⋮ 1/25/2024

"We truly wanted a place where all our community members felt they belonged, and that just happened to be here on our beautiful campus," said Leslie Petersen vice president of contracts and business development at Hanna Center. "We want the (mental health) hub to be seen as a community resource and all are welcome."|

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When the Community Mental Health Hub opened last May on the Hanna Center campus, it primarily sought to provide accessible, culturally sensitive services to Sonoma Valley residents who otherwise would not receive them.

Since then, the hub has provided therapy to more than 150 clients and handles an average of 20 appointments per day. Some 60% of the hub's therapy clients are youth 10 to 18 years old and 60% are Latinx.

"Historically, Hanna has only served youth and naturally, people are still learning about the hub and that it is open to anyone in the community with mental health needs, regardless of age," said Noeli Zamora, clinical director of the hub. "The majority of our youth are self-referred or referred by their family, and residents of our local community."

The hub's leadership team has been spreading the word of the services that are offered.

"We presented last week at the Sonoma County Mental Health Board meeting and have scheduled a presentation this week with Sonoma Valley Vintners & Grower's Alliance," said Leslie Petersen, vice president of contracts and business development at Hanna Center. "We would be happy to provide a presentation to any organization that might be interested in having us come to present general information or we can arrange a presentation on a specific topic if needed."

The hub's community health navigators help to make people aware both of mental health services at the facility as well as those that may not be offered at the hub, but are available in the greater community.

Many of these services are provided by members of the Sonoma Valley Mental Health Collective, comprised of nearly 20 nonprofit organizations. The collective was instrumental in creating a vision for the hub and collaborates with it to coordinate services and programs, exchange funding opportunities and share best practices.

"We have added some organizations to the collective and we see some of the original 17 less often," Petersen said. "However, we are focused and motivated to collaborate and learn what the needs are from each other.

"The group's desire is to address the ever-growing mental health issues and needs for supports in the community. It is a great group of community leaders."

Petersen said a meeting has been scheduled with Vintage House in Sonoma to start promoting hub services to the senior community and that she hopes some group services will be available there soon.

The hub recently arranged for one of its bilingual clinicians, Erminio Carreno, to offer therapy for elementary through high school students on Sonoma Valley Unified School District campuses and at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Sonoma Valley.

"Bilingual clinicians are in high need and we felt strongly about being able to offer services that address both language and treatment barriers to our local youth," Zamora said.

Petersen added, "Erminio helps to facilitate 'newcomers' support groups at Sonoma Valley Unified School District schools. "As a male, Latino, bilingual clinician, Erminio fills a critical gap in the school district's wellness team. He is kind of a unicorn!

"It is challenging to provide or receive mental health support in a language that is not native to you, and Erminio is able to meet kids 'where they are' and to connect with them in a culturally sensitive way."

The idea to create the hub originated after Hanna Center did a community needs assessment in 2022.

"It was evident that our students, faculty and staff were struggling coming out of COVID," Petersen said. "We met with many community leaders, and mental health kept coming up. We had lost several people in our small community to suicide.

"We had a staff of clinicians who had been working with our staff and students for many years and we thought we could be an asset to more than just those who resided on our campus. The Community Mental Health Hub was born from that."

Hanna Center identified and remodeled a building that was near the front of the campus so that people could have easy access to it.

"We truly wanted a place where all our community members felt they belonged, and that just happened to be here on our beautiful campus," Petersen said. "We want the hub to be seen as a community resource and all are welcome."

Zamora said that some people at the hub have been hesitant to enter into therapy.

"Being open to having a conversation about mental health and normalizing that therapy benefits everyone, not just someone who 'needs' it," she said. "We approach every client as an individual with their own unique needs and allow the space for them to tell us how they would like us to help."

Petersen said that she hopes when people leave the hub, they have the tools needed to take the next steps in their life.

"It could be as simple as getting signed up for a support group, a referral to one of our community partners or something bigger, like getting signed up for medical insurance," Petersen said. "The community health navigators are available to community members whether they are seeking help or not."

In addition to providing individual and group mental health services, the hub has offered events focusing on suicide prevention and awareness as well as on the impacts experienced by survivors of suicide.

The hub is utilizing an insurance model and grant/donor funding to cover the cost of services it provides. Approximately 87% of the clients are uninsured or qualify for Medi-Cal.

"Mental health is something that so many people are passionate about," Zamora said. "We have experienced great success in our efforts to fundraise to continue the hub's mission. The continued generosity of our donors is the very reason why we are able to continue to provided care to people in our community who are underinsured or uninsured intro perpetuity.

"To do that, donations and funding will need to continue year after year. We are always looking for ways to sustain our programs so that we can continue to offer quality care to those who need it."

The Community Mental Health Hub is generally open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., but hours fluctuate depending on clients' needs. Some clinicians offer late-evening appointments.

The hub is located at 17000 Arnold Drive in Sonoma and can be reached at 707-996-6767.

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