

Hanna Center receives funding to offer mental health counseling in Sonoma schools

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Slide 1 of 2

Marriage and family therapist Erminio Carreno greets clients in the reception area in the Community Mental Health Hub at Hanna Center on Arnold Drive. The hub will be providing additional mental health counseling to schools in the Sonoma Valley Unified School District after receiving additional funding. Photo taken on Monday, Jan. 22, 2024. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)

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Hanna Center was awarded \$575,000 by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors this month to provide mental health counseling to students in Sonoma Valley through the end of 2024.

The funding was available because Social Advocates for Youth (SAY), a Santa Rosa nonprofit organization, notified the County of Sonoma Human Services Department on Dec. 21, 2023, that it could no longer provide services that it agreed to offer in a \$728,000 contract awarded by the county in 2022.

SAY declared in early January that it is experiencing a financial crisis and reached out to its most charitable donors as well as the general public for help.

The services it was providing through the contract — including mental health services and either group or individual grief counseling for students — were to be offered in partnership with Sonoma Valley Unified School District.

“If there was capacity to provide services and support to other public schools in the county, that could be an option, but it was not a requirement,” said Leslie Antonelli Petersen, vice president of program development and advocacy at Hanna Center. “The funding also includes a trauma informed care training component for staff, which the Hanna Institute team hopes will be used by districts across Sonoma County and beyond.”

Noeli Cardenas Zamora, clinical director of the Community Health Hub at Hanna Center, said the center is working with the county to finalize the contract.

“Our plan is to work with the school district’s wellness team to identify those students with the highest level of need, and prioritize them,” she said. “We have established a very good relationship with the district’s wellness team and are excited to expand our work with them.

“We will use the template created by the SAY team to make the implementation happen as quickly and smoothly as possible.”

Hanna Institute and the hub will both play roles in fulfilling the contract. Hanna Institute will offer the trainings to school staff, both in person and virtually for those unable to attend in person, while the hub will provide clinical staff at the school sites.

The hub opened in May 2023, primarily to provide accessible, culturally sensitive services to Sonoma Valley residents who otherwise would not receive them. This harmonizes with the project that Hanna is taking over from SAY, which aims to support students who do not have access to mental health care and to inform staff so they have the tools to understand the underlying needs of students who misbehave.

By taking over the project, the hub will be adding to its workload, which has included providing therapy to more than 150 clients and handling an average of 20 appointments per day. Approximately 60% of the

clients are youth 10 to 18 years old and 60% are Latinx.

“We are always hiring more clinicians for the hub,” Zamora said. “There is such a high demand for mental health services in our valley. We are actively interviewing and recruiting, but we are in a good position to start our work in the schools with our current team.”

The money Hanna Center received for the project is part of American Rescue Plan Funding (ARPA), which is overseen by the County of Sonoma Human Services Department. After learning that SAY would no longer be able to offer the services in the contract, the department wanted to find another organization to provide them.

So, the department requested applications from interested organizations and five of them, including Hanna Center, stepped forward.

“In April 2022, Hanna, along with 17 other Sonoma Valley nonprofit organizations, unsuccessfully applied for \$5 million in county funding from this same ARPA funding initiative that would have included mental health support in our schools,” Petersen said. “Though not awarded, the collective group has continued to meet monthly and discuss ways to support the mental health of the Sonoma Valley community.

Many of these community-based organizations serve youths.

In December 2023, a donor provided grant funding that enabled the hub to place a clinician two days per week at Sonoma Valley High School, Adele Harrison Middle School and Prestwood Elementary School.

“This provided the schools with bilingual, culturally relevant mental health support for its growing Spanish speaking and historically marginalized youth,” Zamora said. “The relationship with the school district has continued to flourish and has resulted in referrals from students, staff and families to the hub for extended mental health care.

“This existing relationship in the schools and our community partners positioned us well to apply in January on very short notice, for the reallocated SAY funds from ARPA, through Sonoma County.”

Cameron Safarloo, CEO of Hanna Center, is excited about the opportunity to take over the project.

“This incredible opportunity to provide these essential services aligns perfectly with our new vision to expand our work for a greater impact on the wider community,” he said. “This funding will provide us with the necessary resources to accelerate this vision of growth by providing mental health support that is consistent, reliable and geared toward fostering resilience and independence in our youth.”

He said that Hanna Center would be “delighted” to continue to provide mental health in community schools for the long term.

“We will continue to fundraise and look for grant opportunities so that we can continue the critical service in the schools and for our children,” Safarloo said. “Being able to meet them where they are, at school, is very

important to the success of this work.”

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