

Like it or not, you pay for mental health

Gulf Bend's Polzin thinks it wise to pay on front end
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BY GABE SEMENZA - VICTORIA ADVOCATE

A step has been made by a local center to bring awareness to community mental health problems while ditching the stigma attached to them.

Gulf Bend Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center announced Wednesday that it has launched a comprehensive Web site - the first of its kind for the center - and hopes are that those embarrassed to ask about mental health will have a safe, educational place to visit for answers.

The site is www.GulfBend.org. It is part of the center's new strategic plan to improve access to services, to educate the area about mental health and to build relationships with key community partners.

While this Web site is a work-in-progress, it is already chock-full of information about the center and about mental illness and retardation.

On Wednesday - under its "Today's Features" section - browsers could read about a study that links sleep problems to depression in children or about how bipolar disorder has been romanticized because it's often found in writers, artists and musicians.

The site also includes information about the center's goals and plans, as well as handy area telephone numbers to call with questions.

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Don Polzin, Gulf Bend's executive director, said that because "mental health is fundamental to overall health" everyone in this area is affected in some way by it. If it's not felt personally, or present in a friend or family member, it's felt economically, he said.

David Way, director of operations, said that mental health is often to blame for the behavior of those in jail, students who are truant and those using hospital emergency rooms as primary care physicians.

"How many more jails, doctors, hospitals and homeless shelters does a community need?" Way asked, noting that it is less costly to treat mental illness

on the front end than it is on the back end - in the form of jail time and hospital visits.

"Mental illness is the No. 1 cause in loss of (job) productivity," Way continued, adding that depression - by and large a treatable condition - outpaces diabetes and other illnesses that lead to decreased job production.

Way said 20 percent of inmates have mental illness, but that 60 percent of the mentally ill who receive treatment "go on to perform meaningful jobs. Untreated mental health accounts for all these other things."

Polzin said the cost to offer outpatient services to those with mental illness is far less than the cost to house them in jails, care for them as transients or to treat them in emergency rooms where they often can't pay.

"Until you address some basic issues, you're fighting fire but not fighting the cause of the fire," Polzin said. "(Taxpayers) are going to pay for it. It just depends on how you want to pay for it."

More about the site

To help spread these and other messages, as well as to garner input from the public, the Web site will act as a community forum when needed and keep community stakeholders - largely law enforcement and hospitals, Way said - informed about changes.

But Jessica Grutzmacher, an administrative assistant who gave a brief tour of the site Wednesday, said, "(The site is) important to the individual who has a family member with mental illness or disorder or has one themselves and are embarrassed about it. This could encourage them to seek help."

On April 29, 2002, President George W. Bush announced the creation of the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, which Polzin said sought "the impact of mental health on local economies." The cost is great, he said.

That cost is also great to those who go untreated. Ernie Moss, another center director, said those with severe mental illness die 25 years younger than the average person does.

"All of us are stakeholders in this, whether we know it or not," Way said.

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