

BEHAVIORAL

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depression and schizophrenia.

Every day, people in Charlotte County battle these and other illnesses. They don't all want help. But even the ones who do might find themselves standing in line because the astounding need has taxed the system like never before.

People who advocate for individuals with mental illnesses shoulder a heavy load.

Jay Glynn, executive director and CEO of Charlotte Behavioral Health Care, offers up some disturbing information about people with mental illnesses living among us — in our jails and prisons, in our hospitals and perhaps in our own backyards.



NURKIN

The highly educated professionals who serve and advocate for people with mental illnesses are victims, too, of a society built on generations of prejudice, misconception and scorn for people with mental illnesses. These professionals must work around the fact that our nation has failed to protect people with mental illnesses with the same integrity and levels of service available to people with physical illnesses.



MCNALLY

"The need is so great," said Mr. Glynn. "Their primary needs aren't met. If they're on Medicare, it might be a \$2 co-pay to see a physician," he said. "But if they come here for help, it's a \$20 co-pay." That's because the label of specialized medicine is affixed to behavioral health care. And some simply cannot afford specialists, or even for the co-pay.

Not only do those affected by mental illnesses suffer from unequal care, their medical care can suffer, too. Mr. McNally cited this example: A patient with a history of panic disorder takes himself to the emergency room because he's experiencing shortness of breath, sweaty palms, disorientation and chest pressure. A quick EKG reveals nothing, so the attending physician releases him, dismissing the symptoms as another panic attack. Ten steps outside the ER, the person dies in the park-



COURTESY PHOTO

Outside Charlotte Behavioral Health Care campus in Punta Gorda

ing lot from a massive coronary.

Not only are behavioral health services difficult to afford for many people, medical services, which are more affordable, might be compromised as well.

The state of the county's services

The state-run 1050-bed mental health facility G Pierce Wood Memorial Hospital in Arcadia closed in the year 2000. Some people were relocated. But overwhelmingly, "The prisons are swarming with mental health patients" as a result, Mr. Glynn said.

"And in jail," he said — just as in the ER, "they're not getting the treatment they need."

On the other side of town, Brad Nurkin is CEO of Charlotte Regional Medical Center and Riverside Behavioral Center, a private organization that's been treating people with mental illnesses for more than 30 years. For the most part, Riverside Behavioral Center's patients are admitted by physicians, but the center serves as a Baker Act receiving facility as does Charlotte Behavioral Health. (The Baker Act is Florida's involuntary commitment law. The law says that a person who is in imminent danger to his or her self or others may be held involuntarily for up to 72 hours to determine the presence of a mental illness.)

Riverside is a 52-bed facility for adults only, and Mr. Nurkin is busy recruiting the second of two psychiatrists in the same number of months. The facility will then have seven psychiatrists on staff.

The center treats those with drug/alcohol issues, people with advanced Alzheim-

er's disease and those with mental illnesses. Adjacent to the behavioral center is Charlotte Regional's Wellness Center, where patients are encouraged to exercise as part of the healing process. Similar to Charlotte Behavioral Health, inpatient stays last between three and 30 days, depending on diagnosis (single or multiple) and severity.

Not surprisingly, the number of Baker Acted patients has escalated with the recession.

Drugs and alcohol

In November 2008, Charlotte Behavioral opened its recovery center, which offers detox and residential services in a therapeutic environment.

"We're primarily seeing young adults addicted to prescription medications," Mr. Glynn said. "We see a lot of Oxycodone (popularly branded as OxyContin) dependency," he said.

Perhaps because the facility serves an adult population exclusively, Mr. Nurkin has noticed a trend of Oxycodone dependency among middle-aged caregivers who become addicted to their elderly parents' pain medications.

Both executives acknowledge a rise in substance abuse over the past two to three years, which coincides with a rise in unemployment, home loss and the loss of health insurance.

"Two to three years ago, we had a different population," Mr. Glynn said. And with the loss of jobs and homes, children can be affected and deteriorate along with their families.

how you can help

>> Get involved. Take a stand. Encourage legislators to support equality of treatment between behavioral and physical health care and protect Florida families.

>> Rep. Paige Kreegel — (941) 575-5820

>> Rep. Gary Aubuchon — (239) 344-4900

>> Rep. Kenneth Roberson — (941) 613-0904

>> Sen. Nancy Detert — (941) 480-3547

If you would like to help provide additional services for Charlotte County children, adolescents, adults and families with your tax-deductible donation, contact the Fred Lang Foundation, 1700 Education Avenue, Punta Gorda, FL, 33950, or call 639-8300; ext. 275 for more information. The Fred Lang Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit foundation with a mission to help provide hope for a brighter tomorrow with behavioral health treatment for those who cannot afford services at Charlotte Behavioral Health Care.

All in the family

It's not uncommon for a behavioral center to treat every member in a family of four who may have been forced to abandon their home and live in the family car. Or an out-of-work husband who once locked himself in the garage and threatened to kill himself. Or children as young as 7 years old who think about committing suicide every day.

"Just under 50 percent of the people we see here are children," Mr. Glynn said. "We see some 3,000 children in here for treatment," he said, noting that children are being diagnosed younger than ever with severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. They are often the victims of lives turned upside-down.

"We're getting 600 or more calls a month for new people in Charlotte County that we haven't seen. You can't intake and see 600 people a month. We screen them and take the most critical in," Mr. Glynn said, indicating that they hope those who must be turned away can somehow hold on as the center's overworked staff treats as many people as it possibly can.

There's hope that an improving economy will ease the burden on an already taxed behavioral health system. But today, Mr. Glynn and Mr. Nurkin are certain of one thing: there is a critical need for behavioral healthcare services and people to provide them.

As for the future of behavioral health, advocate Mr. McNally is certain of one more thing: "I'd love to be able to work my way out of a job." ■

PROGRAMS

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food costs at the Charlotte County Jail.

"We will be using a vertical style of hydroponics, which better utilizes space than traditional growing," said the jail's supervisor Maj. Tom Rodgers.

"We purchased a total of 1960 pots, which have four spaces in each to grow a plant. Our initial goals are to replace the salad and the vegetable on the inmate trays as frequently as possible.

"A few of the items we will be growing are tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, bell peppers, kale, yellow squash, zucchini, parsley, basil and oregano.

"Of course as time progresses, we will alter our items to maximize our abilities of reducing costs for food.

"Inmate workers will maintain the overall program overseen by one of our civilian staff members. Funds to operate the program come from the Inmate Welfare Fund."

Cleanup camp

The Charlotte County Sheriff's Office coordinated several groups recently that



COURTESY PHOTO

Bruce Rabon sits atop his capsized boat. Sheriff Bill Cameron rescued two others.

cleaned up more than 1,500 pounds of debris at an abandoned homeless camp off the 900 block of Kings Highway, east of Port Charlotte.

CCSO environmental crimes detective Billie Hatmaker said once the landowner legally got trespass signs posted as per the law, homeless people left the area. He contacted Charlotte County Jail office manager Erin Hume, who coordinated and partnered with Keep

Charlotte Beautiful.

Inmates were selected to clean up the area, supervised and assisted by police officers William Miller and Robert Melendez and corrections officer Kevin Baltimore.

"This much needed cleanup effort could not have been possible without the help of others from Charlotte County Environmental Services, Charlotte County Public Works and Waste Man-

agement," said Det. Hatmaker adding that business owners, their customers, and area residents stopped by during the four-hour cleanup and expressed their gratitude.

Sheriff Cameron: a fisher of men

Three fishermen were rescued by Sheriff Bill Cameron earlier this summer after their boat capsized in Boca Grand Pass.

The sheriff and his wife, Canda, had been fishing and saw the boat overturn, dumping the three fishermen into the Gulf.

The sheriff immediately went to their aid and pulled two of them into his boat while the other man waited on top of the overturned vessel.

The sheriff called the Lee County Sheriff's Office to report the incident and they called Charlotte County Sheriff's Office dispatch, which notified Marine Patrol. That agency rescued the man on the overturned boat and the other two in Sheriff Cameron's boat.

The three rescued men were taken to a nearby marina with only one minor injury.

"It was a bad fishing day for them, but it could have been worse," said Sheriff Cameron. ■