

Mental Health Month: Hope House works for community's health Monday, May 14, 2007

By Ramona Frances - The Madera Tribune

With an influx of funding since the passing of Mental Health Proposition 63, eight new programs have been planned or implemented in Madera County. One program includes a staff and peer supported mental health center called "Hope House" in the Behavioral Health Building at 117 "R" Street in Madera.

Hope House Program Director Tim Gallemore said he and Resource Coordinator Alfonso Lopez cultivate an open door policy at the center, which opened in September.

"Sometimes I am able to get my administrative duties done by 5 p.m. and sometimes I don't get started until five. It's because people come first. If people need to talk, that's what we do," Gallemore said.

Twelve staff members are employed at Hope House. When Gallemore, Lopez and Director, Janice Melton were asked if they shared any personal safety concerns working with high-risk populations, Melton said, "Most people with mental issues are not acting out violently; the ones that don't come here are more of a concern."

When the Hope House opened, it was expected to serve less than 60 people, but clients have exceeded 168. Gallemore said people showing up at Hope House are working on personal issues.

"My fear is (regarding) the ones who have needs and are not coming to us, the ones not seeking our services," he said. "The Hope House provides peer support staff. At certain stages of recovery, consumers can reach out to others to share experiences, support and hope," he said.

Lopez and other staff believes the most valuable service Hope House provides Madera County is family and support, a place where people can develop a sense of community and reduce isolation.

Community Board Member Jan Stutzman said she has worked in the mental health field since 1983 and thought she could offer some direction in terms of advocacy, so she sat in on the mental health steering committee in the county.

The board reviews everything the department does and makes recommendations, Stutzman said.

"The biggest hurdles for people facing mental challenges is the stigma associated with mental illness. Gwen Palmer said it was easier to admit she was a drug addict than to say she was suffering from mental illness."

Palmer has recovered from depression and is now employed by Madera County to work with vulnerable populations in the area of Behavioral Health.

The problem of stigma and mental health is so great, a statewide anti-stigma campaign is being planned now for the future.

Madera County provides mental health services to 2,500 people, and a consumer survey has been launched by Behavioral Health to gather public comment from those who have used services. The comments will be accepted up until the next board meeting on June 6. Contact Nancy Gorney at 675-7850 or visit their Web site at <http://www.maderacounty.com/mentalhealth/services.html> for information.

Hope House can be contacted at 664-9021 or 673-3508 for additional mental health related resources.

A directory of services lists services such as mental health counseling, adult alcohol and drug prevention, youth programs, and wellness empowerment networks that include Chowchilla, Madera and the foothill areas of Madera County. Transportation is available to pick up people from eastern Madera County and Chowchilla.
