

Fresno County supervisors weigh teen psychiatric crisis contract

By Marc Benjamin

Fresno County supervisors could decide Tuesday to contract with a mental health services firm to provide crisis psychiatric care for teens who are now shipped outside the county to for lengthy mental health stays.

The psychiatric health facility would be opened at the former site of University Medical Center on Kings Canyon Road and Cedar Avenue. Central Star Behavioral Health will be under contract for up to five years and \$22.26 million. After about six months of renovation, the 7,069-square-foot facility will open.

“There has been nothing in Fresno for many years,” said Carolyn Evans, chairwoman of the Fresno County Mental Health Board.

The new facility will contain 16 beds and will relieve families from having to travel out of town to be near their young loved one, she said.

“Families will be here for their children,” Evans said. “They can visit on a regular basis and be in contact with the staff.”

When children are taken to distant facilities, it’s difficult for families to visit and coordinate with doctors and staff.

“Some of these children have care provided locally so those people can work with the staff at the hospital and the continuity of care will be much improved,” Evans said.

Supervisor Henry R. Perea said not all beds will be filled at all times, allowing other surrounding counties to send their adolescent mental health patients to the Fresno facility, too.

Supervisor Judy Case McNairy said she may ask a few financial questions about the project, but she believes Fresno County has a significant need for the adolescent mental health facility.

“We are spending the money anyway and we are probably spending more money (to transport) and that doesn’t even take into account the human and family impact,” she said.

The county had to stop providing state-certified crisis stabilization unit services in 2006. About 1,300 youth are served at a crisis intervention facility on Millbrook and Shields avenues, but it’s not licensed for crisis stabilization.

The program is aimed at adolescents ages 12 to 18. There have been 360 minors sent by ambulance outside of Fresno County for mental health crisis needs between Jan. 1 and Oct. 31, said Todd Valeri, American Ambulance general manager. Nearly one-third of those patients went to Ventura, others were transported to Fremont, Sacramento and other distant facilities. Only 11 of those children were under the age of 12 and wouldn’t qualify for a bed in the new Fresno facility.

Valeri said his ambulance drivers are either called in from off duty or backfill to drive the distant routes.

“With this new program, kids may have access to services immediately,” Valeri said.

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