

EDITORIAL: Fresno County fills big gap in teen mental health care

After many years of hard work, local leaders are filling a gaping hole in care for teens that created significant emotional and financial hurdles for Valley families.

On Dec. 2, the Fresno County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a five-year, \$22.6 million contract with Central Star Behavioral Health to operate a 16-bed long-term psychiatric facility for youngsters 12 to 18.

The unit, which will initially have 12 beds, will be at the former site of University Medical Center at Kings Canyon Road and Cedar Avenue. It is expected to open after about six months of renovations.

When the ribbon is cut, expect many appreciative tears and jubilant high-fives.

It has been more than a decade since the county had a place where teens with mental-health issues could receive long-term treatment. Absent such a facility, these youngsters are being sent to Ventura, Fremont, Sacramento and other California communities. You can imagine the hardship this places on families already worrying about the fragile state of their loved ones.

According to Todd Valeria, general manager of American Ambulance, his company transported 360 minors outside of Fresno County for care between Jan. 1 and Oct. 31 of this year. Only 11 of those children were under 12 and wouldn't qualify for a bed in the center that will open in 2015.

As there will be times when the center isn't filled with Fresno County youth, it also will serve teens from other counties.

"The need in the Valley is huge," Supervisor Debbie Poochigian said when contract was approved. "There is nothing worse than sending kids hundreds of miles away from home when they have these types of issues. Family is the best thing you can have around you at this time."

Carolyn Evans, chairwoman of the Fresno County Mental Health Board, said that "the continuity of care will be much improved" because families will be able to better communicate with doctors and staff.

And it is expected that the cost per bed will be less than what it costs to send patients hundreds of miles away for long-term care.

Along with opening this new unit, the county plans to move its short-term teen mental-health program, which serves about 1,300 youths, to the former UMC site.

Before the Dec. 2 vote, Supervisor Henry R. Perea described the project as "one of the highlights" of his political career.

Indeed, all of the supervisors should be proud of this accomplishment. So should the mental-health advocates, staff and former supervisors who pushed the project forward in the face of numerous financial and political obstacles all these many years.

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