

Fresno County restoring crisis mental health services

By Barbara Anderson

A major effort to restore Fresno County's mental health services has started this winter inside a building on the old University Medical Center campus at Cedar Avenue and Kings Canyon Road.

It's difficult to envision the drab, brown building as the cornerstone of a plan to rebuild a system of crisis care that has been torn apart in the past decade, but that's until Dawan Utecht, the county's [behavioral health](#) director, explains the renovations will make room for a 16-bed adolescent psychiatric hospital.

The inpatient adolescent unit will allow teens in the central San Joaquin Valley to get care close to home. For the past 12 years, youths with severe mental illnesses have been strapped to gurneys and loaded into ambulances or restrained in the back seat of family cars to be taken hours away to psychiatric hospitals.

Families are ecstatic. "I'm thrilled," said Kirsten Vercoe of Fresno, whose son made four trips to out-of-county hospitals as a teen. "It always astonished me with a city this size that we would have to go to the Bay Area or Southern California for any assistance."

New state funding for mental health building projects opened the door for Fresno County to fill gaps in services that have left children and adults in crisis hanging without places to go for treatment. "Now is the right time" to open an adolescent psychiatric hospital, Utecht said. And the timing also is right to focus on crisis services for adults, she said. "We are trying to reconstruct a continuum of care."

Among behavioral health projects that are planned for this year:

- an eight-bed expansion of [Exodus Recovery](#), the county's adult crisis stabilization unit that now has 12 beds on the old UMC campus;
- relocation of the child crisis unit from a complex of buildings at Millbrook and Shields avenues to the UMC campus, placing it adjacent to the new adolescent inpatient unit;
- construction of a new 16-bed residential treatment unit for adults that will be located on a now-vacant lot on the northeast corner of the UMC campus.

The renovations and additions are an attempt to right a mental health system that has been listing like an unmoored ship for almost a decade. Beginning in 2006, the county made gut-wrenching budget cuts that continued through 2008 with the closure of Apollo, a 16-bed residential program that had housed adults since 1975. More cuts followed, and in 2009 the county closed the area's only mental health crisis center for adults, leaving hospitals largely responsible for potentially dangerous, psychotic patients.

In the aftermath of the cuts, hospital emergency departments were flooded with mentally ill patients, and there were few alternatives for care.

Utecht took reins of the county's behavioral health department in May 2013 and was well aware of the problems. Prior to being hired by the county, she had overseen [Community Behavioral Health Center](#), the adult psychiatric hospital in north Fresno operated by Community Medical Centers. Community Behavioral also felt the brunt of the cuts in county crisis services.

The county had already begun to take care of its missteps, restoring the crisis stabilization unit in 2012. The county did an about-face and reopened the unit on the UMC campus after hospital officials made vocal their complaints

about mentally ill patients laying on gurneys in emergency department hallways.

The county hired a private contractor, Exodus Recovery Inc., to run the crisis unit and within two months of its opening, hospital emergency departments reported a reduction in the number of mental health patients. Now, with funding from the state's Investment in Mental Wellness Act of 2013, the county is adding eight beds to the unit. It is designed for people to stay no longer than a day.

Longer-term care

But pieces of the mental health treatment path remain missing: There is no county facility for long-term care for people in need of more than a few days to recover, and for the gravely ill who need months or longer.

In the past, two privately operated institutions — Fresno Care and Guidance and Valley Care and Guidance — provided long-term hospitalization for psychiatric patients. Both closed in 2005. Since then, the county has had to send adults out of the area for long-term care.

And the county has had to keep patients longer at an inpatient unit designed for short stays of a few days. The unit, operated for the county by Sacramento-based [Crestwood Behavioral Health](#), has had to keep some patients for weeks or months because it's the only locked option, Utecht said. "Someone has been there almost a year," she said. "Community Behavioral Health is not the place for someone to be a year."

Crestwood, however, could have a solution. Fresno County has been following the company's request to remodel the vacant old Kingsburg hospital into a 44-bed secured mental-health facility. The plan has met opposition from Kingsburg residents, concerned about effects to the neighborhood, such as public safety.

And a \$3.1 million Investment in Mental Health Wellness grant will allow Fresno County to build a new Apollo-like residential treatment program to replace the one closed five years ago

"It's going to be a new and improved crisis residential program," said Karen Markland, behavioral health division manager. The 90-day intensive recovery program will be a more home-like environment and will emphasize rehabilitation and peer support, she said.

The county's goal is to allow people to rehabilitate and recover and achieve well being, Markland said.

Helping homeless people

And rebuilding the county's psychiatric crisis services includes community solutions.

Members of a group called [Community Conversations](#) have focused on helping the homeless, many of whom have mental health, substance abuse issues and housing needs. The group has been working to get an intake center located near the Poverello House on F Street. From the center, people could be directed to resources, including county mental health services. Poverello House, The Rescue Mission and the Fresno County Housing Authority are working together on the project. The center is supposed to open Jan. 13, said Lynne Ashbeck, regional vice president of the Hospital Council of Northern and Central California and a member of Community Conversations.

The center hopefully will end the "Fresno shuffle" of sending the homeless from agency to agency for services. "They can enter into this intake space and get connected with help rather than making nine stops," Ashbeck said. "

The result, she said: "This is the best system of care that we've had in a decade or longer."

Care for teens

And there's nothing more significant than the planned opening of the 16-bed adolescent psychiatric hospital.

It had appeared opening an adolescent unit was an impossibility. Several efforts failed after Community Medical

Centers bought Cedar Vista, a psychiatric hospital in north Fresno in 2002 and closed the adolescent psychiatric unit.

The county saw a chance for a unit, however, when space was found at the UMC campus and it had available capital building funds from the Mental Health Services Act, a state tax on millionaires. The county will get reimbursed for treatment services from state and federal funds as well as from private insurance.

The last piece — a company willing to operate the unit — was solved when [Stars Behavioral Health Group](#) of Long Beach made a bid to run the hospital. On Dec. 2, county supervisors approved a five year, \$22.6 million contract with the company. The unit will open with 12 beds for youngsters ages 12 to 18 sometime later this year, but be able to grow to 16 beds.

Utecht said Stars was the only bidder, but that's wasn't a shocker. Adolescent units are risky ventures, she said. Statewide, only 11 counties have adolescent psychiatric hospital beds.

An adolescent unit is needed on several levels, Utecht said. Sending teens to outside care has been financially costly — \$1.6 million last year to the county — “and you can't quantify the cost to families financially and emotionally,” she said.

There will always be risks to starting a new service or trying something different, she said. “However, we believe that the known risks/downsides/costs of keeping things as they are for our clients and families exceeds the potential risks of this endeavor.”

Vercoe said her family had the resources to travel to be near their son, Zachary Parker, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She can't imagine the emotional strain on parents who don't have the financial ability to visit their child.

Parker, 20, said other youths who were hospitalized had no visitors and felt abandoned. “They couldn't understand how difficult it was for their family because they're in this moment of extreme crisis.”

Many of his fellow patients were from the Valley. “I met so many people from the Fresno area,” he said. “Having both the quality and availability of the treatment for people in the Fresno area would just be such a leap forward.”

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