

By Briana Boyd

*Advocacy Council Meeting
July 9, 2019*

It's common knowledge many of the people homeless and living on the streets in Fairfield and Suisun are battling severe mental illnesses.

Solano County's behavioral health department, with its team of clinicians, doctors, nurses, and mental health specialists, has several programs in place related to their ongoing efforts to reach the homeless, as well as other individuals struggling with mental health.

However, the lack of permanent and transitional housing for Solano County's homeless population has hindered those efforts. Freddy Ford, a liaison for Solano County Behavioral Health, highlighted the mental health programs and the county's efforts during the Fairfield-Suisun Chamber's Advocacy Council meeting July 9.

"Right now, we can get them into treatment and get them stabilized and hope they stay the course of treatment but at the end of the day, if they don't have a place to live they end up back in the streets," he said. "We'd like to one day see a program where we have that transitional housing, where people can be stabilized and receive medication and counseling and have that basic need met."

For now, efforts are focused on the programs that are available as well as community outreach, especially with law enforcement in all county cities. There is a lot of stigma surrounding mental illness, Ford explained, which often deters individuals from seeking services that the county provides.

"One in five individuals will deal with it in their lifetime. If it's not one of us here, we definitely do have friends or family who struggle with mental illness," Ford told the council. "Because of that number, we are all connected in a certain way, within our roles in the community. We all play a part in coming up with solutions and strategies."

In Solano County, there are two main ways for people to get connected with mental health services – by phone on the mental health access line and or in-person intervention. The access line, 1-800-547-0495, is operated 24 hours a day and answered by a trained clinical staff member from 8:30 am to 5 pm weekdays. This access line is ideal for someone who is not in an acute mental health crisis but wants to be connected to county mental health services. This number is also the one to call for information on substance abuse services or the county's detox program.

Through the Access Line, the clinician conduct a brief phone screening and then routes the individual calling to the most appropriate county program. Depending on the mental health crisis at hand, the individual is seen in a doctor's office in three to 10 business days.

The county's intervention program provides mental health services "on the spot" to people who visit one of three clinics in Solano County, Ford explained. A person can walk in, complete a screening and assessment, and be seen by a psychiatrist in a matter of hours. The clinics are open 8 am to 3 pm in Fairfield, Vallejo, and Vacaville.

Meanwhile, Solano County is piloting a new, assisted out-patient program that provides sustained and intensive court-ordered treatment to patients without hospitalization. It can also serve as a 'bridge to recovery' for people recently released from inpatient facilities

"These people are often on the fringes of the community and in real, significant need of services and treatment but caught in that revolving door of 5150 or coming in and out of jail," Ford said. "You see them and you think, 'if this person was only connected to these services, they could have a better life.' This program is designed to support those individuals and get them into treatment."

It's important to note that the assisted out-patient program often starts out as a voluntary step for the individual battling a mental illness, although it could also be court ordered. "They have to be in a place in their walk in life that they are willing to do this," Ford said. Once an individual is discharged from the program, they return to their original city, where ongoing mental health services are provided.

Steve Huddleston, vice-president of public affairs at NorthBay Healthcare and an advocacy council member, applauded the services offered by the county. He hopes that together, they can help address an ongoing need at NorthBay's five locations. When looking at the number of people who visit NorthBay's emergency department for mental health and substance abuse, the unmet need is 75 percent higher than neighboring counties and the state average set in 2014.