

HEALTH CARE: Coalition plans coordination on mental health

by **D. Ashley Verrill** Staff Reporter

SONOMA COUNTY – The Mental Health Coalition of Sonoma County has spent the last four years quietly preparing for the launch of what could make it the most important player in the county’s mental health system as a kind of clearinghouse of information for providers and the public. Since Sonoma’s only inpatient psychiatric care unit operated by St. Joseph Health System closed in March, there has been a rising public discussion of mental health services. But in reality, inpatient care accounts for only a small fraction of a broad array of mental health services. “A lack of communication, collaboration and leadership is the current system’s biggest downfall,” said Stella Rijeka of St. Joseph Health System. Ms. Rijeka is the coordinator of St. Joseph’s mental health quality of life services and is the contact lead for the Mental Health Coalition of Sonoma County. “Instead of haphazardly trying to patch a system together, we said, ‘What if we all work towards the same goal together.’ ... We have all these services, but the appearance is that there’s nothing because there is no one directing people where they can go or letting them know what’s out there,” she said. County officials have said repeatedly they are responsible only for the 14 percent of those with specifically defined mental health needs. But as a recent study demonstrates, the county has a wealth of programs for people with all kinds of mental health needs and only lacks “the glue that could bind them together.” “Right now there is no system of mental health. There are private payers and there is public health, but we have no unifying agent for both those groups,” said Sonoma County Mental Health Services Director Art Ewart. The study, commissioned by the Petaluma Health Care District, was the second element of research released last October that found the “major barrier to good care stems from the lack of information

about the mental health system of care and insufficient involvement with both private practice and community-based providers.” Surveyed patients and families said they were unsure where to go for services and were poorly directed and frustrated with the services they could find. During a meeting of county officials, community leaders and Petaluma Health Care District board members late last month, all agreed the county is moving from what is called a medical model to a social or recovery model. But now the question is who will lead the effort to integrate providers so that patients don’t get lost in the system. “What our intentions have been is to map the safety net in a way that makes sense for the community, while simultaneously dispelling stigma and helping mental health sufferers to live normal lives instead of waiting until they are in crisis,” Ms. Rijeka said. The mental health coalition began four years ago from St. Joseph Community Benefit Quality of Life funding, but so far has collaborated with many groups in the county including Kaiser Permanente, Family Action of Sonoma County, Redwood Community Health Coalition, community clinics, the Petaluma Health Care District, Santa Rosa Junior College and others. Officials started by surveying the community and hosting public discussions, ultimately deciding that the change had to begin with physicians and other providers. Now the initial fruits of their labor will be realized with the release of what they are calling a mental health resource, or a comprehensive catalog of all the county’s resources that will be put in the hands of physicians and care providers in every setting. It has information about housing, drug-addiction recovery, support-groups, hotlines, agencies, county-run services and low and no-cost services. The book will be updated twice a year, distributed widely and available on the group’s Web site, which will be completed by the end of this week. The site will also include a survey for providers that will allow the coalition to continually assess the system and report on the findings annually, which will also be public. “It seems really simple, but we’ve haven’t had anything in the county before, where all resources were listed in one place,” Ms. Rijeka said. “Providers were anxious even to find out if a patient had mental health issues because they had nowhere to send them.” The group also recently completed a tool for providers that will help them

detect indicators of mental health issues in their patients early so they can be treated before it develops into a more serious problem. The tool works basically as a questionnaire with a five-scale rating system in which the patient can rate their status from “thriving” to “destructive.” Along with the tool, the group hosts monthly educational workshops to teach community outreach providers how to use the tool, identify mental illness and where to direct patients for help. “The way providers’ services are today, it sets patients apart from the rest of the community; but what the social model seeks to do is integrate their care into everyday life,” said Sharon Jackson of Health Marketing & Management, who presented the mental health study during the Petaluma meeting. This fall, the group will also host a series of forums at Santa Rosa Junior College campuses on a project called “mapping the safety net.” The goal of the project is to connect issues with strategies and identify which groups in the county should take on which issues. “I don’t know that we need any one player leading, we just need to together identify what we have, where it is, and how we can direct the patient there,” said Ms. Rijeka. Currently the coalition is a St. Joseph program, but leaders are in the process of filing for nonprofit status and becoming independent, which will be key to its next move. Once they feel the system is cohesive, officials hope to begin a marketing campaign targeting myths and stigmas surrounding mental health.