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GUEST OPINION: County's improved picture for mental health services

By MIKE KENNEDY

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In light of recent letters, editorials and articles in response to the tragic incident in Mendocino County, and the recent events in Sonoma County, I'd like to provide information about mental health services in our community.

As we struggle with state budget reductions, the investments made through Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act, have positioned our county to better meet the mental health needs in our communities now and in the future.



DONNA GRETHEN / Tribune Media Services

Through Proposition 63, the county emphasizes community involvement and recognizes the complex array of factors — from housing to employment — that are necessary ingredients to recovery for people with mental illness. With the state's safety net tattered and the economic recovery slowed, we know that without this initiative many more people with mental illness would be homeless, on our streets and in our jails and emergency rooms.

Some California counties have considered the implementation of AB 1421, "Laura's Law." However, Laura's Law, which passed in 2002, has encountered opposition from clients, service providers, advocates and disability rights attorneys. Counties have cited three factors in their decisions not to implement the law's provisions: 1) There is no provision to allow forced medication; 2) There is no funding attached; and 3) No voluntary programs can be defunded in order to support AB 1421. Accordingly, 57 of 58 California counties have chosen to fund targeted mental health services through the Mental Health Services Act.

Sonoma County's Forensic Assertive Community Treatment Program, known as FACT, is comparable to the Laura's Law treatment model. It provides intensive services to adult mentally ill offenders who have committed low-level felonies or misdemeanors and typically have both high mental health and substance abuse needs. Referrals to FACT come directly from the Mental Health Court.

Those in this program for one year or more have an 81 percent reduction in jail days, a 50 percent reduction in hospitalization, an 80 percent reduction in convictions and a 95 percent reduction in new felonies.

The Crisis Intervention Training Academy for Law Enforcement provides a four-day, 32-hour training academy designed to increase officers' skills to intervene with mental health consumers and has provided training to 220 law enforcement

An advertisement for the Chase Sapphire Preferred credit card. The background is dark blue. At the top, it says "EARN 50,000 BONUS POINTS." in large white letters, with "\$95 ANNUAL FEE WAIVED FOR THE FIRST YEAR" in smaller white text below it. On the left, there is a small image of the blue credit card with the text "CHASE SAPHIRE PREFERRED" and "D. WALPER". To the right of the card, it says "2X POINTS ON TRAVEL & DINING" in large white letters, with "NO FOREIGN TRANSACTION FEES" in smaller white text below it. At the bottom right, it says "A Card Of A Different Color" in white. At the very bottom, there is a blue button with the text "LEARN MORE" and a right-pointing arrow.

personnel from Sonoma County Sheriff's Office and every city's police department. A new mobile support team, the next phase to the crisis intervention training championed by county Supervisor Shirlee Zane, will be operational in January.

We also have implemented a pilot Crisis Response Team, which responds to calls from Santa Rosa Junior College, the two west county high schools and all Santa Rosa high schools. The team is able to assess, identify and link young people, ages 16 to 24 with mental health issues, to services.

Psychiatric Emergency Services, located across the street from Sutter Medical Center, provides crisis intervention services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including access to inpatient psychiatric hospitalization outside the county. In addition, Aurora Health will join the many providers in our county by opening a new 95-bed psychiatric inpatient unit in early 2012.

The Mental Health Services Act is a vital part of the county's community mental health system that benefits all Sonoma County residents and improves the quality of life for thousands of people with serious mental illness every day. During the past four years, we have listened and responded to Sonoma County consumers and family members, including the community at large, by adding a number of new service entry points utilizing several mobile teams that provide outreach to hard-to-reach, vulnerable and sometimes resistant individuals.

I'm proud to be part of a county committed to reducing barriers and providing easier access for individuals to find the mental health services they need.

Mike Kennedy is director of the Sonoma County Behavioral Health division.

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