

New mental health care clinic offers hope for young people at risk of serious illness

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When his teenage daughter was ill, suffering from severe anxiety and depression that would ultimately lead to her death, David Brown and his wife, Seong, were lost trying to find help in a fragmented, unsupportive health care system in which mental health patients remain underserved and stigmatized.

“I liken our experience to being in a large stadium, and there’s only one bathroom in that stadium, and nobody knows where that bathroom is,” though you keep asking everyone, the Santa Rosa man said Saturday. “That’s what we were like trying to find help for our

daughter, and eventually the pressure gets so much that you do not know where to turn. No one is providing you the answer.”

Now, hundreds of Sonoma County residents who each year confront a mental health crisis because they or someone they love is suddenly beset by symptoms they cannot explain are a step closer to finding needed care with the opening Saturday of a new treatment center in Santa Rosa.

The Elizabeth Morgan Brown Center, named for the daughter David and Seong Brown lost two years ago at age 19, aims to provide holistic, patient-centered care they hope will save others.

Designed specifically to provide early intervention for young people at risk of living with psychotic illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, it's a starting point that founders hope will ultimately expand to address the vastly unmet needs of young people with mental health challenges.

“Suffice to say, the demand is huge,” said Brandon Staglin, president of One Mind, a Rutherford-based mental health advocacy and research nonprofit whose Accelerating Serious Psychiatric Illness Recovery Initiative, or ASPIRe, is behind the clinic's development.

The new center, similar to existing clinics in Napa and Solano counties, will be operated by two North Bay nonprofit organizations — Buckelew Programs and Aldea Children & Family Services, which also runs the two other clinics.

It's intended to provide early care to those with serious, emerging disease or who are at risk of it, but even those whose needs fall outside what the center offers will be referred “in a very warm and supportive way to the right place,” Staglin said.

Services will be available regardless of ability to pay.

The center will offer coordinated care based on an innovative, state-of-the-art approach that includes individual therapy and medications, as well as family-focused therapy, case management, peer services and support in education and employment.

UC Davis Professor Tara Niendam, who is part of the university's early psychosis clinical team and will provide technical assistance to the Santa Rosa clinic, is to wrap around treatment that addresses medical and social needs, allowing patients to “go on with their lives,” she said during a virtual grand opening Saturday.

“We may need to take you off the highway,” and onto a side road for a time, “but we're going to get you back on the freeway,” she said.

Initial funding for the center includes \$1.5 million over two years from Kaiser Permanente,

\$2 million over four years from Sonoma County, through a state Early Psychosis Intervention Plus grant, and close to \$500,000 from county Mental Health Service Act funds.

Serious mental illnesses, including major depressive disorder, which can have psychotic features, emerge between the ages of 10 and 24 in about 75% of cases, and occur at a rate of about 273 per 100,000 population per year, according to recent studies, said Staglin.

In Sonoma County, more than 1,300 people each year could thus begin to experience significant mental health symptoms, he said.

Navigating the confusing, inadequate, underfunded system of care during a terrifying time leaves many people untreated, however. This allows progressive illnesses to become more severe — derailing lives, disrupting families and reducing chances for recovery from treatable diseases — Staglin and former Rhode Island Congressman Patrick Kennedy, a national mental health advocate who participated in the virtual event, said Saturday.

“If you don’t interrupt it early,” Kennedy said, “you’re unable to see the real benefit of mitigating the long-term disability that comes from these very serious illnesses, and I think it says so much about this program that it’s about that immediate wrap-around for people who have experienced that first incidence.

“Not waiting means that we respond in the urgent way that we would if it were a heart attack, if it were a stroke ... if it were a cancer in stage one,” he continued. “So it really is taking a page in how we address other illnesses and applying that to a set of illnesses that have been too long neglected in our country.”

Elizabeth Brown, a one-time student at Cardinal Newman High School, was herself an advocate for the mentally ill, volunteering for the National Alliance on Mental Illness even as she battled her own disease.

A precocious young woman who left for college at 15 and shared her story with peers as she struggled with what would be diagnosed as borderline personality disorder, she died of suicide in 2018 after years in which she and her parents tried to navigate the Kaiser system and looked elsewhere for help, her parents said.

The new Elizabeth Morgan Brown Center is located at 2300 Northpoint Parkway in Santa Rosa.

Anyone who wants to inquire about assessments or services can call program director Jackie Aguilera at 707-255-1855.

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