

Report: S.J. mental health system short of psychiatrists

More Cambodian, Spanish speakers also needed

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STOCKTON - San Joaquin County's mental health work force suffers from a severe shortage of psychiatrists and needs more Spanish- and Cambodian-speaking mental health professionals who can communicate with a large portion of the county's population, according to a plan developed over the past year.

In the past 18 months, the county lost six psychiatrists to the state prison system, which is under a federal receivership to reform its physical and mental health system, according to county Behavioral Health Services.

Recruiting has barely made up for the losses, Behavioral Health Director Vic Singh said. The number of psychiatrists dropped from 19 to 13, and now he employs the equivalent of 14.5 full-time psychiatrists, he said.

"It's really competitive out there right now for psychiatrists," he said.

Plans to build an 1,800-bed prison health care facility and a re-entry facility for prison inmates in the county would increase the strain on mental health resources, according to the Workplace Education and Training Plan approved by the county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

The \$3.1 million plan to begin addressing these and other staffing concerns over the next several years is a result of a year's worth of effort, including meetings with nearly 500 community members. It will be submitted to the state for approval. The money, anticipated to be spent through June 2016, comes from the 2004 passage of Proposition 63, the so-called millionaires tax also known as the Mental Health Services Act.

However, funding is not certain.

One provision of the state budget deal struck in Sacramento last month puts a measure - Proposition 1E - on the May 19 ballot that would redirect \$460million from Mental Health Services Act funds to mental health programs for children. If the measure passes, it's unclear exactly what funds would be affected.

"We don't know what pot they're going to steal it from," Supervisor Larry Ruhstaller said.

Another Proposition 63-funded plan - this one on prevention and early intervention - is scheduled to come before the board next month.

The plan under review Tuesday focused on the work force and included ways to increase mental health career development and promote the hiring by the Mental Health of clients and their family members.

The plan also reports that a disproportionately low number of Spanish speakers use the mental health and substance abuse programs provided by county Behavioral Health Services. About 9 percent of the work force is proficient in Spanish, compared with the 20 percent of the county population who are Spanish speakers. This represents a gap of about 100 Spanish-proficient employees, according to the report. It would take an additional 18 mental health workers proficient in Cambodian to make up for that language gap.

The community has played a part in developing the work force plan, said Cary Martin, chairman of the county Mental Health Board.

"There is a great need for support," he said. "I believe that it is clearly demonstrated that there is a need."

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