Researchers ID behavioral health priorities

Alcohol abuse, child abuse, neglect among major local issues

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LAS CRUCES » Alcohol abuse, child abuse and neglect, and adult depression are the top behavioral health issues right now in Doña Ana County, according to a national assessment pilot program recently conducted by researchers at New Mexico State University, according to a news release.

The community is invited to learn more about the results of the assessment and a toolkit of interventions and programs developed by the project’s technical committee during a free webinar from 3 to 4 p.m. today. An archived version of the webinar will be available at www.healthbench.info.

The Community Assessment and Education to Promote Behavioral Health Planning and Education project, known as CAPE, is a national project developed to provide resources for local decision makers to better understand the behavioral health concerns in their region. Doña Ana County was one of 10 communities nationwide selected through a competitive application process, the news release stated.

With funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration division of the Department of Health and Human Services and facilitated by the Department of Agriculture, CAPE explores how local health decision makers are currently gaining information on the behavioral health practices in their communities and how they can get access to needed information for coordinated local efforts.

Esther Devall, department head for Family and Consumer Sciences and Extension Family and Consumer Sciences in NMSU’s College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, led the project in Doña Ana County, along with Elsa Arroyos, an associate professor and interim department head of Counseling and Educational Psychology at NMSU, and Valois Pearce of the NMSU Community Mental Health and Wellness Clinic.

Top priorities

The top priorities in Doña Ana County identified during the project, which were selected through a survey of local community leaders, were alcohol abuse; child abuse and neglect; adult depression, anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, physical and mental domestic abuse, illegal drug use, and suicidal thoughts. Devall said the results confirmed what many in the behavioral health community know.

“I don’t think they were surprising,” Devall said. “I think all of us who work in this field have seen these issues. One thing that’s challenging for our community right now is the fact that our infrastructure in terms of mental health and behavorial health has been weakened.”

Devall was referring to the closure of several providers last year after the New Mexico Human Services Department halted payments to 15 nonprofits that provide behavioral health services following an audit of their billing practices. Memorial Medical Center has also experienced diminished capacity recently in its in-patient psychiatric unit due to a shortage of psychiatric staff, according to MMC Chief Operations Officer Steve Ruwaldt. He said steps are underway to fill the vacancy, but it will take some time to do so.

CAPE pilot program

Devall said her team was drawn to the CAPE pilot program due to their involvement in the NMSU Community Mental Health and Wellness Clinic, which opened in July 2012.

The clinic, which currently operates two locations in O’Donnell Hall and Cervantes Village on campus, will relocate in January to the Early College High School Arrowhead Park Medical Academy.

Pearce recently presented the results of the CAPE survey to employees in Doña Ana County’s Health and Human Services Department. She said those workers are looking for resources to refer people to because they don’t provide direct services themselves.
Pearce said the information provided by the survey will be useful both for identifying priorities for the community and identifying resources for useful data collection—which is important when it comes time to make a case for federal and state funding.

“How do you present the information? How do you pull together a report? You need data in addition to the personal stories,” Pearce said.

Devall agreed.

“Stories can have a big impact when you are talking to stakeholders like lawmakers when you are seeking funding, for example,” Devall said. “But you have to be careful about taking one person’s experience or story and generalizing from that. You have to balance that with looking at data and seeing how those match up.”

**Online resource**

One product of the survey data is a toolkit that will be available online to the community, with current information about resources and places to find more information. Having that contact information readily available can make a difference when it comes time to find services, Pearce said.

“People can’t go surfing and searching for information when they’re in crisis,” she said. “We have to get information to people before the crisis and keep that information current.”

Devall said NMSU has applied for the next phase of CAPE, Community Behavioral Health Early Warning Systems. If accepted, Doña Ana County would be a “Barometer Community,” in which behavioral health stakeholders would provide biweekly surveys to help determine community priorities and response to emerging issues.

There’s no cost to attend today’s webinar from 3 to 4 p.m., and no advanced registration is required. For a direct link to the webinar, visit http://connect.msu.edu/cape and select “Enter as a Guest” if not already selected. Type your name (first and last) into the text box provided, and click on “Enter Room.” Participants are encouraged to use the chat feature to submit questions or comments.

For more information about CAPE or to see any of the project reports or the archived webinar, visit www.healthbench.info.

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