

MERCED SUN-STAR

Mental health services coming to communities surrounding Merced

By YESENIA AMARO
yamaro@mercedsun-star.com

Maria Guzman De Martinez knows Planada needs a lot -- including mental health services.

"My daughter has depression, and she goes all the way to Merced" to get services, Guzman De Martinez said in Spanish.

Guzman De Martinez said her 24-year-old daughter, Juana Martinez, suffers from depression because of problems she had with her partner. She said it would make a difference if mental health services were offered locally because many people in Planada don't drive. "Sometimes there's no ride," she said right before getting in a truck of someone who was giving her a lift home after picking up her grandson at Planada Elementary School.

Guzman De Martinez's daughter is among the Planada residents and residents from other rural towns in Merced County who will benefit from a new Merced County Mental Health Services Act Innovation Plan, Strengthening Families project. The \$1.9 million project, which will run over three years, will have work done in Planada, Le Grand, El Nido, Dos Palos and South Dos Palos, said Sharon Jones, Mental Health Services Act coordinator in Merced.

Those communities were selected because there was an indication that the outlying areas in the county weren't getting appropriate mental health support or access to services. Distance was among the barriers that prevented people from seeking help. The goal of the project is to help people get the services they need. "The purpose of this program is to improve access to services and to increase the quality of services for healthier families and children" in those communities, she said.

The project will target children newborn to 18 and their families, Jones said. It will help them understand how developmental milestones and life transitions among other family-related factors affect healthy growth.

The department will hire at least two community developmental partners in each of the communities to be the liaison between the community and the project, Jones said.

"It would be someone who knows the community, who has a passion for the community and who has a heart for the community," she said. "To engage the communities. To build a rapport with the communities and to start the process."

Each liaison position will be part-time and will pay \$13.77 an hour, she said.

The liaisons will work with two expert trainers, Jerry Tello and Hector Sanchez-Flores. The department has hired them to help with the project, Jones said.

The department has had community meetings in Le Grand, Planada and Dos Palos, and it's in the process of nailing down a date for a community meeting in El Nido. As the project moves forward, there will be more community meetings and training to forge a dialogue on what each community's needs are, she said.

"This is a chance for the community to tell us what they need," she explained. "We want people in our community to dream big. We want mental health to have a better presence in the communities."

The mental health department is working with schools in the communities to coordinate the meetings. The community meeting in Le Grand took place last week at Le Grand High School, said Javier Martinez, school principal. "It's an excellent program. It provides not only our students, but the community, the tools that they need," he said. "Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of representation in this area, especially for mental health, so when they come to us, obviously that's a plus for us."

He said the school plans to hold monthly community meetings, and will send fliers and messages to parents. He will also make announcements at churches.

Sometimes there's a misunderstanding of mental health among the Latino community, he said. The meetings will be open to everyone in the community to learn more about mental health. "We look forward to having them (the community) on board," he said.

Planada resident Carmen Zamudio said it will be beneficial for people in the town to know more about mental health because a lack of mental health can lead to serious problems. "It's good because there's a lot of people who really need" those services, she said in Spanish while in her front yard.

And now, thanks to an innovative project, mental health services are coming to them.

Reporter Yesenia Amaro can be reached at (209) 385-2482 or yamaro@mercedsun-star.com.