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POASTER: Proposition 63 services reach seriously mentally ill in Stanislaus

By Larry Poaster

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He walked the streets, week after week, wrapped in a blanket.

"Four years ago, I would see this man on the streets, on my way to work," said Elizabeth Oakes, chief of the Adult System of Care at Behavioral Health and Recovery Services Stanislaus County.

"I used to call him Blanket Man because he'd be completely covered by a blanket most of the time. The last time I saw him he was sitting on a curb and looked badly beaten. SHOP outreach frequently talked to him on the streets. He didn't want our services; it took years for him to even accept a pair of socks from us. I finally asked someone 'whatever happened to Blanket Man?' I found out that he had decided to use our services and was no longer living on the streets. It took years but it finally happened."

SHOP — Stanislaus County Homeless Outreach Program — focuses on outreach and engagement. Every day, a team of two mental health professionals hits the pavement, usually visiting the Garden Gate Respite Center and homeless encampments to talk with individuals with serious mental illness who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Engaging them to access services can be challenging yet rewarding; ultimately, it works. A recent report by Telecare shows the number of homeless days for those who received SHOP services was reduced by over 90 percent.

SHOP is just one example of the successful mental health programs in Stanislaus County funded by Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act.

Enacted by voters in 2004, Proposition 63 levies a 1 percent tax on incomes of \$1 million or more and has served thousands of individuals with serious mental illness. It has been especially effective in Stanislaus County where every effort is made to partner with other community services; in fact, Stanislaus County has earned the reputation of being the model for other counties throughout the state.

"We had someone who would not engage with us. At first he wouldn't talk at all and then when he did, he was threatening," says Mike Wilson, forensic manager of the Integrated Forensic Team (IFT). "He had been in and out of the criminal justice system for gang and drug issues and was living in a tent in a family's backyard. He successfully went through transitional housing, now has his own place through Section 8 housing and gets along well with his neighbors. He is active in groups, has contact with his family and is looked up to by his peers."

It's those who are cycling in and out of the criminal justice system that the IFT targets. Individuals with serious mental illness need more support and engagement when they're part of the criminal justice system, so the team, quite literally, meets the client where they're at; the outreach team goes to the jail and identifies those who would benefit from the wrap-around services that IFT provides.

These individuals may be homeless, at risk of homelessness, have frequent contact with law enforcement or be frequent users of hospitals and emergency rooms. IFT is able to provide everything from crisis response to helping them find housing and employment. As a result, incarceration rates of those involved in these full service partnerships were reduced by nearly 80 percent, homelessness decreased by 96 percent and employment increased by 86 percent.

The need is apparent and, with budget cuts, it has made implementation challenging. Some claim Prop. 63 doesn't serve individuals with serious mental illness, but they're wrong. They are receiving services and something even more priceless: lives not dominated or limited by mental illness.

Poaster is chairman of the state's Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission, which oversees Proposition 63 programs. Poaster, a Modesto resident, worked for Stanislaus County's Department of Behavioral Health Services for more than 30 years, the last 22 as director.

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