Suffering in silence

Mental health screenings to be offered to county teens

BY CORY FISHER
Staff Writer

Sophomore year in high school — it's the time of life when academic pressures start to mount, social pressures start to kick in and adolescence has arrived in full force.

While high school is a challenge on many fronts, Nevada County mental health professionals say the sophomore year is a key time to assess the mental and emotional well-being of students.

"The 10th grade is when a lot of mental health issues show themselves," said Linda Grotke, coordinator for the Student Assistance Resources and Services Program, also known as STARS, within the Nevada Joint Union High School District. "It's the peak for suicide ideation."

According to data compiled in 2009 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 28 percent of high school students statewide "felt sad and hopeless enough over a two-week period to halt usual activity," and 13 percent "thought seriously about suicide."

In Nevada County, the picture doesn't look any better.

"Locally, suicide rates have gradually increased in the last six years and continue to be above statewide rates, which is typical of many rural communities," said Jennifer Rhi Winders. "We have routine screening for vision and hearing — why not for mental health?"

Winders is part of a new collaborative teen screening program, "What's Up? Wellness Checkups," which includes the Nevada County Behavioral Health Department, the Suicide Prevention Task Force, Nevada Joint Union High School District's Student Assistant Program and Tahoe Truckee Unified School District.

What's Up? Wellness Checkups is based on an evidence-based suicide and depression screening tool developed by Columbia University's "TeenScreen" program, said Winders, who is the project's case manager and outreach coordinator. She and project coordinator Galen Ellis, along with clinical coordinator Shellee Sepko, are under contract with Nevada County Behavioral Health to oversee the teen screening program.

Beginning Feb. 4, western Nevada County 10th-graders will have the option to fill out a 10-minute computerized questionnaire with Truckee sophomores following suit in March. Support staff will be on-site to answer questions and provide feedback and resources if needed.

The nationally recognized screening program is designed to identify factors associated with suicide risk and emotional health. The screening can help to identify teens with mental health issues and alert their parents, allowing them a chance to seek help before problems become severe.

Columbia University's data

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What's Up? Wellness Checkups outreach coordinator
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revealed that "90 percent of teenagers who die by suicide have a treatable mental illness at the time of their death, most often depression."

"Our hope is to get the kids screened who are flying under the radar and get them the help they need," said Shellee Sepko, LMFT, the Nevada County Teen Screen site and clinical coordinator. "Teen years can be so difficult — we see a lot of depression and anxiety."

Last week, consent and informational forms were sent out to all parents of 10th-graders in the district and principals made calls to families. Prior to the screening, all parents and students themselves must give consent to take part in the voluntary, confidential and free checkup. In addition to basic health questions about vision, dental and hearing problems, the questionnaire asks questions regarding symptoms of depression, anxiety, suicidal behavior and thinking, as well as use of alcohol and drugs. Those who ask for help — or whose screenings reveal a need for follow-up — will meet privately with a mental health clinician to determine what level of support is needed and to discuss an action plan of the family's choice.

"We're seeing a lot of kids struggling, especially in this economy," said Trisha Delli, assistant superintendent for the Nevada Joint Union High School District. "Many of our teens are not getting the support they need at home. We know from research that the 10th grade is the year many issues arise, but the screening is open to any student who wants to participate."

No one sees the value of a program like What's Up Wellness Checkups more than Mike Bratton, a Grass Valley insurance agent who lost his son, Michael Bratton Jr., to suicide in 2006. He has since devoted much of his life to suicide prevention.

"Anything to help identify suicidal inclinations is extremely valuable — there are a lot of kids suffering inside," said Bratton. "Even if we just pick up a few from this screening, it opens a door, and it's all been worthwhile."

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