

## Council seeks to address mental health issues prevalent in the Big Bend

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(Photo: DrAfter123, Getty Images)



Mental illness continues to be a growing concern for the Big Bend — and a group of more than 20 local mental health providers is working to identify and address issues.

The push comes at a time of heightened sensitivity to the plight of the mentally ill in the wake of the Parkland high school mass shooting and the Legislature's allocation of millions to address the long-neglected issue.

The Mental Health Council of the Big Bend's studies have found that higher rates continue to threaten the region. The Big Bend has seen an 8-percent increase in Baker/Marchman Acts, according to the Baker Act Fiscal Year Annual Report of 2015/2016.

According to self-reported stress ratings, overall, Leon County residents scored a perceived stress score of 15.3 out of 20 — higher than the 13.2 national mean.

Leon MHC-BB has been keeping a pulse on the region's mental health in order to address its most prevalent concerns — and detect service gaps. Initiatives are divided among four subcommittees: evaluate, expand, educate and engage.



Nancy O'Farrell serves on the Mental Health Council of the Big Bend (Photo: Special to the Democrat)

"There are more people falling through the cracks every day," said member Heather Flynn, associate professor and vice chair of Florida State University College of Medicine's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine.

Leon MHC-BB wants to help spot and catch those people.

By studying "epidemiology of mental illness in the region" and prevalence rates through surveys, studies and ongoing data mining, the council seeks to address the Big Bend's specific needs, said Jay Reeve, CEO of local behavioral health facility, the Apalachee Center and chair of the council.

"The best way to remedy the gaps in health care is to figure out where the gaps exist," said Reeve.

Some areas are more stressed than others. South side and Frenchtown areas show the highest anxiety and emergency room usage rates in town, according to a survey.

"It's a rolling crisis," said Reeve. "It's rarely been treated like other public health problems."

By bringing issues into the forefront through awareness programs, like a video series that dispels mental health stigmas, the council wants to change that.

Along with developing a psychiatric residency program to address the shortage of psychiatrists, other current key projects include collecting anonymous mental health diagnoses to determine specific disorders common among patients who are uninsured or on Medicaid.

"The folks who have the most trouble affording services ... those are the ones we really want to get connected with services," Reeve said.

The council is also in its early stages of meeting with area superintendents and law enforcement to discuss mental health programs in schools as the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act was signed by the governor last week. The act allocates \$69 million to the Department of Education for mental health assistance.



Florida Gov. Rick Scott signs the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Act in the governor's office at the Florida State Capitol in Tallahassee, Fla., Friday, March 9, 2018. Scott is flanked by victims' parents Gena Hoyer, left, Ryan Petty, second from left, Andrew Pollack, right, and his son Hunter Pollack, second from right. (Photo: Mark Wallheiser, AP)

Along with FSU's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine and the Apalachee Center, other providers involved with the council include the Big Bend Community Based Care, 2-1-1 Big Bend, United Way of the Big Bend, Whole Child Leon, DISC Village, National Alliance on Mental Illness and others.

"The message a lot of families got about (mentally ill) loved ones was, 'This person will always be ill. ... They might not be able to work. They might not be able to have a family.' It was a pretty grim, hopeless picture," said member Nancy O'Farrell, who has been part of NAMI for 7 years. "Our message to families is: Recovery is possible. People really need to hear that."

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*If you are contemplating suicide, are worried about a loved one or need emotional support, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.*

*Visit [med.fsu.edu/mentalhealth](http://med.fsu.edu/mentalhealth) for a database of mental health resources available in the Big Bend.*