

Barriers hinder access to necessary mental health care

Lack of awareness, education, societal stigmas among obstacles

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DURHAM — As national attention focuses on whether or not mental illness contributes to violence, Durham mental health care officials have found that violence—among other kinds of trauma—may contribute to mental health challenges.

Although the Northeast Central Durham area suffers from many of the same mental health issues as the rest of the country, trauma plays a larger role in these issues than it does in other communities, said Lisa Stacey, chief executive officer of Family Legacy Mental Health Services, Inc.

A 2011 Durham County health assessment conducted by the Partnership for a Healthy Durham estimated that 17,000 Durham County residents need mental health treatment. A 2007 Neighborhood Improvement Services focus group found mental health as one of the most common health-related issues in NECD.

BECOMING Durham, a project that connects existing community services with youth ages 16-21 with mental illness, associates mental health issues with “life challenges.”

“We’ve found that youth with a mental illness are three times more likely to be involved with criminal justice than youth without,” said Brandon Alexander, BECOMING’s social marketing coordinator. “Those same ones are the ones more likely to drop out of school and just not further their education.”

Keith Patterson, a teacher at Durham Technical Community College contracted through the Criminal Justice Resource Center, said that issues stemming from education, a lack of resources and a lack of jobs contribute to the state of mental health.

“I think the biggest thing to understanding mental health in [NECD] is to look at the factors that contribute to those issues,” he said. Patterson has previously worked with group homes and now assists ex-offenders attempting to re-enter society.

Regardless of the mental illness or its source, mental health officials agreed



Brandon Alexander, social marketing coordinator for BECOMING Durham, looks through participants’ work. BECOMING Durham is one mental health care service aiming to help youth ages 16-21. (Photo credit: Caitlin Owens)

that several barriers exist to receiving treatment. These include awareness of services, access to services and the stigma associated with mental illness.

David Reese, executive director of the East Durham Children’s Initiative and a member of the Partnership for a Healthy Durham Steering Committee, said that while services are available in the community, there is a lack of awareness of these services and a sense of inaccessibility.

“Although there are a lot of programs that provide mental health services,” Reese said, “no one has a sign on the door that says ‘mental health services.’”

Stacey said that the community needs more education on what mental health is, what it looks like and that they have the freedom to choose which agency to go to for treatment.

Access to treatment can also be problematic, Stacey said, because many mental health care agencies have stopped providing services in customers’ homes. Thus, if the customer does not have transportation to the agency’s office, they have trouble accessing services.

Stigma also serves as a large barrier to treatment, as it does throughout the country. Stigma is enhanced within the African American and Latino communities, Stacey said. In NECD, African Americans constitute 75 percent of the population and Latinos make up 18 percent.

Stacey has found that some of this

stigma comes from a cultural tendency to keep things “behind closed doors” and some of it comes from a fear of deportation among undocumented Latino community members.

Regina, the mother one of Stacey’s customers who recently moved out of Durham, said that a lot of times, African Americans do not like to go to therapy. She is African American.

“They think white people go to therapy and black people go to church,” she said.

Alexander also sees stigma as a large problem in the community and hopes that the current national discussion will help bring more attention to the topic.

“No one really wants to talk about it, so what we’re wanting to do is bring mental health to the forefront,” he said.

Not only do stigmas cause mental illnesses to go untreated, they also open the door for mental illnesses to not be treated quickly enough, Stacey said. In many cases, early intervention is crucial.

“Because those stigmas do exist,” she said, “people don’t seek care early enough. Early intervention is so very important. If they don’t seek care early enough, for themselves or for their family members, what might start out as one thing then begins to fester and then it becomes something entirely different.”