

BY YOLO COUNTY SUPERVISOR SANDY
MAY 2, 2019

OP-ED: MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

Dear Community,

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, an observance that creates an opportunity to both promote mental health and to reduce the persistent stigma around mental illness.

Both statewide and in Yolo County, an estimated 5%^[1] of the population suffer from serious mental illness. This is nearly 11,000 people in our county of 220,000^[2] residents. Mental illness is defined as a mental, behavioral or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment, substantially interfering or limiting one or more major life activities. Although the burden of mental illnesses is most keenly felt by those with a serious mental illness, many more have undiagnosed or untreated mental illness ranging from serious to mild. Left undiagnosed or untreated, mental illness can negatively impact the trajectory of an individual's life and cause unnecessary or increased hardship for loved ones and those around the individual.

One of the most tragic aspects of mental illness, and one of the many reasons why awareness of mental health is important, is suicide, particularly among young people. In California, suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 25-34 and the third leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24. Additionally, more than twice as many people die by suicide in California annually than from homicide.^[3] These statistics are heart-breaking, but for me, they are also a reminder of the essential services that are required to help those living with mental illness through their most challenging times.

We are all aware of the stigma associated with mental illness. I have even encountered people who suggest that I stop talking about it! However, I would like to believe that our society is taking strides to overcome this barrier, which can lead to an increase in the early detection and treatment of mental illnesses. Early detection and treatment improve health outcomes for the individual, and can also be lifesaving.

To help reduce the stigma and increase compassion around mental illness, and to raise awareness about the importance of mental health, I would like to leave you with a couple suggestions:

- Stand up for mental health services in your community: Support facilities and policies that offer hope and treatment to those who suffer and their families and friends.
- Use ‘person-first’ language: When speaking about or with someone who has a mental illness, remember they are a person and their diagnosis does not define them. Instead of saying “mentally ill person”, try saying “person living with mental illness”.
- Be aware of how social media can be used to denigrate and discriminate against those with mental health issues: For example, when you see a post with negative comments regarding a homeless person who is obviously struggling with a mental health issue, ask to have the post taken down.
- Recognize, that you don’t know what you don’t know: Be compassionate because you don’t know the struggles of others.
- Create and teach awareness: Be mindful of your own mental health and the mental health of those you love. Sometimes the best way to support someone who may be struggling is to simply ask, “are you ok?” or “would you like to talk?”
- Participate in awareness opportunities during the month of May: The Mental Health Awareness ribbon color is green and there are ribbon-creating activities at Yolo County’s Davis, West Sacramento and Woodland Wellness Centers. Additionally, you can participate in maternal mental health awareness by joining the social media campaign. Visit the Yolo County Health and Human Services website (www.YoloCounty.org/HHSA) to learn more.

Mental health services and treatment can lead to a healthier tomorrow for you, your family and your community. Please join me this month, and always, in embracing those who live with a mental illness, encouraging those who need treatment to seek it, and in being an advocate for your own mental health.

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, Yolo County has a crisis access line which can be reached at (888) 965-6647. Suicide Prevention can be reached at (888) 233-0228.

Sincerely,

Supervisor Gary Sandy
Yolo County Board of Supervisors District 3

[1] Prevalence Estimates provided by CA DHCS.

[2] US Census 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/yolocountycalifornia>

[3] Based on 2015 CDC data. http://kevinscause.org/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/California-Facts-2017_1.159213013.pdf.