

POSITIVE
FROM PAGE 1

The clinic is located on the second floor of Carr Mill Mall and will be called the UNC Center of Excellence for Community Mental Health. Gilmore's long-term goal is to provide comprehensive services to the community, utilizing university resources from the departments of psychiatry and psychology, the schools of social work and nursing and the rehabilitation counseling program.

The clinic will initially be staffed by two full-time social workers and a part-time psychiatrist and psychologist from the university. Students will also work in the program, thereby gaining real-world experience.

"One of the main goals," says Gilmore, "is to develop an interdisciplinary training program in community mental health. We hope to develop evidence-based practices and then go out across the state to train practitioners."

While initially focusing on schizophrenia and psychotic disorders, Gilmore says, "We're going to do the best that we can to see as many people as we can. We'll take all comers at this point."

The OASIS program has moved from offices near University Mall to Carr Mill Mall and has been offering services at Carr Mill for about a month. The STEP Clinic is due to open soon after the first of the year.

Nowhere to go

Gilmore is also serving on Chapel Hill Mayor Foy's Mental Health Task Force.

"I think it's a good group," Gilmore says. "Many of the important players in the community are there. The charge is a good one."

That charge is to identify the impact on the community of "changes in the mental health service delivery system ... create awareness and generate discussion about the mental health service system" and then "make recommendations for the future."

The task force is chaired by Dr. Natalie Ammarell, a long-time consultant in the delivery of human services and former president of the Inter-Faith Council. While at IFC, Am-

marell began discussions with Foy about the way mental illness affects the entire community, in particular with regard to homelessness.

Former County Commissioner Margaret Brown has also shared her concerns about the relationship between mental illness and homelessness with Foy, and encouraged him to form a task force.

Mental health reform in North Carolina was initiated in 2001, with a mandate to move the mentally ill out of state institutions and into community-based services delivered by private providers. But community-based services were never sufficiently funded. Without adequate community services, state institutions have become so overcrowded that stays are generally limited to a few days, regardless of a patient's needs.

Brown recognized early on that the premature release of mental patients from UNC Hospitals into a community with very limited options for care was bound to exacerbate the county's homeless problem.

"When you start ending these programs and dumping all these people out, where are they going to go?" Brown asks. "The only places to go are to the emergency room [or] on the street."

"So I went to Kevin Foy and said, 'Kevin, why don't you pull together a meeting of the head of psychiatry and the chancellor and some other people, and let's sit down and talk about mental health reform and the impact it's going to have on the town of Chapel Hill."

"Let's anticipate the impact and see if we can't brainstorm."

Ammarell agrees with Gilmore that Foy's task force represents diverse perspectives on mental health issues in Orange County, but stresses the importance of continually hearing from other voices, particularly of the consumers of mental health care services.

"My goal is to get lots of perspectives at the table," says Ammarell, "but to keep it a manageable size."

She also stresses that while the task force has been formed in Chapel Hill, its mandate is to address the needs of the entire county, "because everyone is affected." In recognition of that mandate, the task force includes Gwen Harvey, Orange County's assistant city man-

ager.

Ultimately, Ammarell says, "The goal is to look at how our work can reach beyond Orange County. The mayor is already looking into that."

"The fact that all of these key stakeholders are coming together to dialogue and strategize is positive," Mark Sullivan, task force member and executive director of the Orange County Mental Health Association, writes in an email reply.

"The issues that we are facing are the results of state policy that we do not have much influence over, and the economic landscape makes things more challenging.

"However, I am hopeful that we can overcome some of the turf issues that are problematic and that we can begin to take responsibility for our community as a community."

'Down and dirty'

Chapel Hill psychiatrist Clay Whitehead is another early task force advocate, and is now one of the 15 members.

"The number one objective I have is trying to get people aware of the problem," says Whitehead.

His second objective is to "open the possibility of a community renewal" built on an understanding of the depths of the problem, and to "do something creative and benevolent" to address that problem.

It just makes sense to use local talent and resources, and locally generated funds, to solve a local problem, Whitehead says. Stressing the importance of the university's involvement, he sees the opening of the UNC Center of Excellence for Community Mental Health as exactly the sort of initiative that can begin to address this crisis.

Whitehead says we could create a model program, but it should not be approached as "some rarified research kind of enterprise."

While "the 'great institution on the hill' can offer a great deal" in terms of best-practice and administrative models, he says, "we're talking down and dirty here. We've got to get out there and take care of people."

Beginning anew

Newspaper accounts depict a broken mental health care system in North Carolina. But for many advocates, includ-



PHOTO BY AVA BARLOW
Dr. Natalie Ammarell has recently been appointed by Chapel Hill Mayor Kevin Foy to chair a mental health task force to address the problems of mental health care in Chapel Hill.

ing Margaret Brown and Clay Whitehead, there is no "system" at all.

Reassembling a network that worked relatively well four decades ago isn't an option.

"There's nothing to knit back together," says Brown. Building anew, she urges, must begin at the community level; and the university's involvement is critical.

She stresses that the town must show leadership, and says she has faith in Foy.

"Kevin is the only person of leadership in this community that I can see that could pull this together," she says. She believes Foy understands the issues and potential repercussions, and is uniquely positioned, as mayor of Chapel Hill, to urge the university to commit its considerable resources.

Ignoring this crisis, says Whitehead, is clearly no longer an option. He believes spreading awareness should be the first objective of any local initiative.

"Everyday you see something in the paper about how another clinic is closing up," he says, while yet another state official urges us to be patient with

reform.

"What excites me," Whitehead says, "is that a few people here have perceived that this is not such a great situation, and are trying to figure out what can be done."

Are we as a nation any closer to recognizing that we have a mental health care crisis, and that mental illness is as critical as any other serious illness?

"I think there are more people that know this," Whitehead says. "But it's still very much stigmatized. We're in denial."

He believes though that with a creative approach here in Orange County, "We might be able to illustrate how a local community can tackle and resolve this problem."

Whitehead acknowledges that the task ahead is daunting, particularly within the current economic climate. But, he says, "When people start to think – and they *are* now starting to think – they're going to realize that we've got a serious problem in this country," and that we must chart a path for providing "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Breakdown

This story is the seventh and final installment of *Breakdown: A Series on Mental Health Care in NC*. Go to www.carrborocitizen.com/main/2008/10/04/breakdown-series/ to read about:

- A young man diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and his experience with our state's mental health care system.
- How a relatively effective mental health care system in North Carolina once provided services, and then unraveled.
- The chaos created by mental health care reform in North Carolina.
- Is the best health care available in Orange County enough?
- A family's struggle to find the care their son required.
- What mental health care advocates say must happen to create a better system.

RESOLUTIONS

FROM PAGE 1

going for different results next year by changing those things that didn't work this year.

— Delores Bailey, executive director, EmPOWERment Inc., Chapel Hill

My resolution: To lower my blood pressure. My plan: Play more, work less. My doctor also recommends less fried food – but, hey, let's be realistic.

— Brad Bonneville, Bonneville Renovation & Repair, Carrboro

I have only one resolution for 2009: Give more.

— Valerie Foushee, chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, Chapel Hill

My 2009 resolution is to prioritize my 2008 resolutions.

— Tom Maxwell, singer/songwriter/musician, Pittsboro

I gave up New Year's Resolutions for Lent.

— Mike Nelson, county commissioner, Hillsborough

Make amends with ruffled friends, push for hope, push for change, be more green, improve my cooking skills, eat more oysters.

— Tim Peck, Peck & Artisans, Carrboro

My resolution for 2009 is not to make resolutions. I'd just like to accept the rich gift of my life and live it, as well and deeply as I can. I know there are positive aspects to resolutions, but my soul wishes to disembark from the American ship of poisonous self-help.

— Gary Phillips, Pittsboro

I will finish my second novel in 2009.

— James Protzman, author/artist/activist, Chapel Hill

I think my new year's resolution will be to meditate more.

— Ruby Sinreich, Orange-Politics.org, Chapel Hill

I resolve to let my workdays be guided by my highest priori-

ties, not my inbox. And to make time for exercise so I can keep up with Conrad, who is walking at 10 months.

— Dave Thomas, director of social media for SAS, Carrboro

Here's my resolution: to find new, better and more sustainable ways to use the power of successful businesses to close the opportunity gap between the rich and the rest in our society.

— Kevin Trapani, CEO of the Redwoods Group, Chapel Hill

Same resolution I have every year: not to use so many paper towels. Never achieve my goal.

— Daniel Wallace, author, Chapel Hill

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