

Mental health network that helps youth receives gift

\$2 million will be used to expand support services

BY RUTH LIAO
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When Yana Pichardo was finishing her senior year at Corban College, she felt disoriented and lost. Pichardo was experiencing symptoms of psychosis -- but she didn't know it at the time.

"I remember telling my mom, there's something wrong with me, you gotta take me somewhere," Pichardo said. "And she was crying, and saying, 'but I have no idea where.'"

Pichardo's illness became so severe she was briefly hospitalized at Salem Hospital. During her stay, Pichardo found the help she needed -- through a program that helps spot the signs of schizophrenia or bipolar disorders in teens and young adults.

Early Assessment and Support Team, known as EAST, has been in operation since 2001. The Mid-Valley Behavioral Care Network recently received a \$2 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for the support team to use in Marion County.

—The grant will be used for the next four years to allow the youth support team to expand its services to children as young as 12 years old.

The program offers social work and psychiatry resources. The grant will help broaden its therapy program, include job support with employers and increase staff resources. By September, the program will launch a campaign to increase awareness of mental health disorders in middle schools, high schools, colleges and community groups in Marion County.

Tyler Wingett, 18, of Stayton, said he's come a long way since he was first hospitalized. He was in ninth grade, feeling suicidal and homicidal. But Wingett said after five years in the EAST program, he's no longer fighting with his parents and siblings. Once close to dropping out of school, Wingett will soon receive his high-school diploma.

"If I can do it, I think anyone else can do it," Wingett said. "I have bipolar and OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), but it doesn't even faze me anymore."

The program currently serves teens and young adults from 15 to 30 years old. About 100 participants are in the program, said EAST coordinator Tamara Sale. More than half of the participants do not have health insurance, Sale said.

"We're hoping to identify people before they lose their jobs and drop out of school, and before the symptoms are acute," Sale said.

The program hopes to lessen the chances of cases developing into larger problems if psychosis is treated early, Sale said.

About the program:

EAST, the Early Assessment and Support Team operates under the Mid-Valley Behavioral Care Network, which provides mental health service for Oregon Health Plan recipients in Linn, Marion, Polk, Tillamook and Yamhill counties.

Go to the EAST Web site -- www.eastcommunity.org -- or for more information call Ryan Melton, clinical coordinator, at (503) 361-2667 or (503) 480-5122.

Psychosis, which includes schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, can manifest early with signs of hallucinations, delusions or severely confused thinking, Sale said. A person gradually may have trouble at school or have uncharacteristic thoughts and behaviors.

The grant also will allow Oregon Health and Science University to collect research specific to EAST program, said Bentson McFarland, a professor of psychiatry, public health and preventative medicine.

McFarland said EAST models after existing services available in Australia and Scandinavia, but the United States lacks a preventative approach to mental health care.

"Our health system is notorious for focusing on emergencies and disasters and underfunding prevention," McFarland said. "We're very good at sending ambulances to people. We're not good about building a fence to keep people from jumping off the cliff."

EAST's efforts will be monitored in a national study comparing Marion County's efforts to three similar programs around the country.

Pichardo, who graduated from McKay High School, described herself as the 4.0 student -- active in soccer, cheerleading and student government in college. But before Pichardo heard about EAST, she had tried all types of mental health services-- her family doctor, counselors and clinics. She was diagnosed with depression and at one point was taking three different medications. But it wasn't working, she said.

Then Pichardo and her family met with an EAST case manager and a psychologist.

"They said, we think you're experiencing psychosis," Pichardo said. "And I'm like, duh, that's what I'm experiencing. It's not just major depression or the blues or college anxiety."

Members of her support team visited her home several times and called to remind about upcoming meetings, group events and classes. Pichardo said other providers were more hands-off, telling her to call them back in a month.

"They all cared so much," Pichardo said. "Every one person I worked with really wanted my life to get back on track."

Pichardo, 29, now volunteers with EAST and works part-time as a personal caregiver. Pichardo said she credits the program for her turnaround.

"They saved me," Pichardo said. "They gave me my life back."

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