

Northwest Health **FOUNDATION**

NEWS RELEASE

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Northwest Health Foundation Helps Fund An Innovative Oregon Early Psychosis Project

Mid-Valley Behavioral Care Network Provides mental health and chemical dependency services in Linn, Marion, Polk, Yamhill, and Tillamook counties, and the unique treatment program is getting results.

PORTLAND, OR – When young people first experience terrifying psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions, they and their families often confront a mental health system that assumes a long-term negative outcome. One innovative Oregon program – the Early Psychosis Project (more commonly known as EAST, or the Early Assessment and Support Team) – is changing the pessimistic view that adolescents who experience a psychotic episode are doomed to develop serious mental illness and a deteriorating quality of life.

Through the Mid-Valley Behavioral Care Network, five Oregon counties have come together to treat and support young people when they experience the initial symptoms of psychosis. With early detection, the use of low-dose antipsychotic medications, and counseling and support for the entire family, the latest research shows many teens can avoid being overcome by schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, or bipolar disorder. This leading-edge approach is based on best practices guidelines developed by the Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Center in Melbourne, Australia and is currently offered in only five other sites in the U.S.

Northwest Health Foundation President Thomas Aschenbrener says, “We are very supportive of the EAST project. Mental illness in teenagers and young adults is more common than people realize, striking three percent of the population. The EAST project is one of the most effective programs we’ve seen in attacking it early while there is a chance for these young people to lead healthy, productive lives.” Funds from the Northwest Health Foundation are helping to expand community education and early

intervention for young people and their families. The project is also being funded through a multiyear matching grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and with support from the Meyer Memorial Trust, Spirit Mountain Community Fund, and the Paul G. Allen Charitable Foundation.

Psychosis results from an imbalance in brain chemistry and can cause disturbing symptoms. Left untreated, psychosis can lead to suicide, accidental death, drug abuse, criminal activity, or homelessness. The goal of Oregon's EAST project is to prevent long-term disability, first by providing early intervention and support to young people, and then by creating the infrastructure to sustain this approach at a system level.

In one local case, a young man named John was having problems at school after he began making threats to kill people. An assessment revealed that he was experiencing significant delusions and other symptoms of schizophrenia. At first he was very resistant to services, but the EAST counselor and doctor gained his trust. Gradually they helped him to distinguish symptoms from reality, and he chose to take medicine and participate in treatment. He was also connected with an employment specialist, who helped him develop his own successful small business. Now he actively participates in peer counseling and staff training sessions. During one session he described the difference in approach between EAST counselors and other counselors he's met. He said in the EAST program he never felt like anyone else was making decisions for him; that he was making his own choices to get well. He describes the process of gradually recognizing his thought process when ill as symptomatic and interfering in his life, and that he feels his experience with the EAST program has made him stronger.

"John's experience with us is not unlike what we see from other clients every day," says Tamara Sale, EAST Coordinator. "If we can identify these young people at the earliest possible stage of psychosis, we can work with them and their families to develop and provide supports that minimize their long-term disability. These kids do not have to be sentenced to a poor prognosis and despair."

Initial results of the project are promising. There are currently 97 young people receiving treatment. Eighty-three percent of clients in the three-year-old program are in ongoing treatment, and 83% are in work or school-related activities. EAST has dozens of success stories, and the young people who are succeeding are becoming EAST's most important resource, giving the program guidance about development of new groups and activities, and providing orientation and mentoring to others who are new to the program. Families are networking with each other, learning from each other's success, and generating hope.

Bob Nikkel, the director of the Oregon Office of Mental Health and Addiction Services, says, "We, along with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Oregon, believe that making the EAST program available in every community should be a top priority for the state. Long-term, it's definitely in Oregon's best interests, both financially and morally, to intervene with these kids as early as possible."

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An independent, private foundation, the Northwest Health Foundation is governed by a 15-member Board of Directors, led by founding chair Senator Mark O. Hatfield. The Foundation was founded in 1997 from the net proceeds of the sale of PACC Health Plans and PACC HMO. Find them on the web at www.nwhf.org.