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At wellness center, 'no one needs to worry about being judged'

Santa Rosa program provides group setting for those recovering from mental illness

By ROBERT DIGITALE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

With hair nets on their heads, Dennis Hegwood and Peter Vöros cooked a lunch of pasta vinaigrette for the members, interns and staff of a new center in Santa Rosa serving people recovering from mental illness.

The Wellness & Advocacy Center provides a place for people to use their minds and imaginations, said Hegwood, an intern at the facility off Chanate Road near Sutter Medical Center. It offers the chance to learn to use computers, make art, cook or tend a garden.

"It give us a creative outlet," he said.

The program opened this spring, made possible by a voter-approved tax on Californians with incomes that exceed \$1 million per year. Sonoma County provides the center with about \$320,000 a year in funds from Proposition 63, the state Mental Health Services Act of 2004.

What the center's members and staff share is that both have received treatment for mental illness. Several suggested that the center allows them a place to help one another focus on moving forward.

"Being mentally challenged doesn't have to be a curse," said Cici Wright, who helps members gain computer skills and find information on re-entering the work force.

The center is located in an old, tile-roofed building in a largely underdeveloped section of county property across from Sutter Medical Center. Its one-way driveway off Chanate Road, known as County Farm Drive, features a long rock retaining wall and views of wooded hillsides.

Officials hope the program will help members make progress toward getting jobs and reintegrating into society.

"This is for folks who are ready to make bigger leaps in their lives," said Laurie Petta, vice president of work force development for Goodwill Industries of the Redwood Empire, which oversees the center.

More than 80 people already have signed up to be members of the center.

"I think for a few people, it may well just be a destination point, but for others it will be a point of transit" toward re-entering society, said Art Ewart, director of mental health services for Sonoma County.

Each year the county serves about 6,000 people coping with mental illness, he said.

On Friday, several members took time to paint or do crafts. Among them was Jeff Glouthier, who studied art and graduated this spring from Santa Rosa Junior College.

"It disciplines me to spend a little bit of time doing this," he said of his work in watercolors. "I have two hours I can sit down and do some art."

Ashley Aranda, the center's program coordinator, said members are creating a speaker's bureau to be called "Stamp Out Stigma."

She also is starting a support group for those age 18 to 25, young adults who often lack knowledge on where to turn for help dealing with mental illness.

At the center, Aranda said, "no one needs to worry about

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feeling judged."

The center is holding an open house from 3 to 6 p.m. Thursday at 3400 Chanate Road.

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