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Dixie County conference shows resources for response to mental health issues



Prevention Specialist Robert Wells of Meridian Behavior Healthcare speaks about resources to help people.

By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 7, 2019 at 8:09 p.m.

CROSS CITY – A Dixie County High School senior introduced the program Tuesday afternoon (Aug. 6) where mental health professionals spoke about available resources in Dixie County.

Jacob Knox, a DCHS senior, introduced Prevention Specialist Robert Wells of Meridian Behavior Healthcare. Wells spoke about some of Meridian's many programs to help individuals with mental health issues.

Wells, who has been in the prevention field since 2001, shared information about some of the services provided by Meridian Behavior Healthcare. Meridian provides housing, intervention services, group therapy, as well as in-patient and outpatient care and other services, Well said.

Wells is one of the founders of the Levy County Prevention Coalition in 2001. He was instrumental in the success of the Dixie County Prevention Coalition starting some years ago, when he worked with Katrina VanAernam, the founder of that coalition. Now, Wells is assisting in the start-up of the Gilchrist County Prevention Coalition.

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VanAernam and several other people were present for the gathering on Tuesday. Some people shared how drug abuse and domestic abuse have hurt them.

Wells said coalitions find that gaps that need filling as they work to prevent people from falling victim to the ravages of drug abuse.

Among the things Wells teaches is a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training course as a step all individuals can take toward wellness and helping others to reach wellness. He is willing to teach to groups of people from a half dozen to 25 people at a time.

Just as physical health issues have warning signs and symptoms, early intervention for mental illness is very important, the Meridian website notes. The MHFA course teaches participants the risk factors and warning signs of a variety of mental health challenges common among adults including: anxiety, depression, psychosis, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and substance use disorders, the Meridian website notes.

Wells also spoke Tuesday afternoon about the Meridian Mobile Response Team.

Meridian Behavior Healthcare Mobile Response Team (MRT) Manager Alesha Smith, also was present Tuesday at the Dixie County Public Library in Cross City.

The Meridian Behavior Healthcare MRT Program is to help troubled young people, 25 years and younger, who are in Baker, Bradford, Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Suwannee and Union counties whenever they are in need of crisis intervention services 24-hours-a-day, on any day or night.

The MRT Hotline number for young people to call when they need help is 1-800-330-5615.

While neighboring Taylor County is not in this coverage area for Meridian, all 67 counties in Florida have resources.

The goal of the MRT program is “... to lessen the trauma of crisis situations, particularly diverting individuals away from” emergency rooms and jails. As part of that goal, the MRT intends to stabilize the person in the most conducive setting possible.

During the initial crisis phase, a counselor with a master’s level counselor responds to the crisis location at any hour of the day or night. Meanwhile, a care coordinator establishes links to appropriate community resources.

According to the information shared with the public on Saturday, Mobile Response Teams from Meridian aim to

- Respond to the site within 60 minutes of a crisis notification;
- Follow up the next day with a tailored behavioral health crisis-oriented care plan;
- Provide screening, standardized assessments and referral services;
- Create safety plans to prevent future crises;
- Include family members in decision-making and support processes;
- Assure links between all continuing care services, including psychiatric care, as well as outpatient and referral agencies; and
- Promote the use of innovative technology.

To respond within 60 minutes, sometimes a law enforcement officer is needed to provide “Telehealth,” where the crisis counselor can aid the person via a video-audio link.

Telehealth is a convenient and confidential way to access real-time outpatient services through a computer, tablet or smartphone. Meridian uses secure broadband or cellular connections to protect privacy during a session, the Meridian website notes.

Assessment, counseling, psychiatric evaluation, and medication management are available by telehealth. Telehealth can be provided from Meridians clinics to home or a mobile device, to a school, other community settings, or from one Meridian clinic to another, the Meridian website notes.

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While the MRT is for young people, individuals of any age can use the Meridian Behavior Healthcare 24/7 Crisis Line by calling 1-800-330-5615.



Seen here are (from left) Jennifer Gregory, Debby Sweem and Donna Crawford, members of The Hope Dealers. They are currently working under the umbrella of the Dixie County Prevention Coalition, but the plan is for The Hope Dealers to become an independent group that provides peer support for drug rehabilitation and prevention.

Also, on Tuesday afternoon, Debby Hagan Sweem introduced a new group named The Hope Dealers.

Working under the auspices of the Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition, Program Coordinator Sweem is joined by Donna Crawford and Jennifer Gregory as they are all peer support specialists.

They all have experienced drug abuse having a negative impact on their lives, and have recovered for three or more years to qualify to take the training to become peer support specialists.

Lutheran Services of Florida provided the training for these women who are The Hope Dealers.

The Hope Dealers are those who have been through the burdens from addiction. They provide people with support in designing their very own methods for getting off of drugs and staying off of them.

The telephone numbers for people with drug problems to call for help in getting off of drugs are

Debby Sweem 352-210-2601

Donna Crawford 352-210-2561

Jennifer Gregory 352-440-2776.

Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition Event Coordinator Rebecca Fusco provided a wealth of telephone numbers to call for resources that can help.

In addition to the Meridian Crisis line and The Hope Dealers phone number, both noted above, other groups people can utilize for assistance are:

* Lutheran Services of Florida at 1-877-229-9098. This 24-hour North Florida hotline

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provides referrals for anyone living with a substance abuse or mental health disorder.

* Overcomers at 386-965-8461. This is a Christian faith-based recovery support group that helps individuals and their family members break the chains of drug addiction, without cost or judgment. They meet every Monday at 6 p.m. in the New Life Church on Chavous Road in Old Town.

* Alcoholics Anonymous at 352-210-3623. This group meets every Wednesday night at 7 p.m. in the Ameris Bank location in Cross City, where the Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition also has its offices.

* 7th Day Adventist Recovery Group at 352-231-0849. This is a Christian faith-based recovery support group that is focused on rest and restoration. It meets every Friday at 7th Day Adventist Church in Cross City.

* Tri-County Community Resource Center at 352-507-4000. Located in Chiefland, this is a resource for people to find help if they are needy. It also serves as a clearinghouse to direct people who need help across the whole spectrum of social services.

* Another Way at 1-866-875-7983. This agency helps people who are suffering as a result of domestic (spouse or child) abuse.

* Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

* Sexual Assault Hotline 1-800-656-4673.

There are resources to help people in need.