

## Depression study leads to Aspen Hope Center

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by Andrew Travers, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

The Aspen Valley Medical Foundation (AVMF) opened a new mental health referral center on Tuesday, in the hopes of curbing a local suicide rate which has tripled the national average.

Known as the Aspen Hope Center, and headquartered at the Aspen Airport Business Center, the upstart will allow people to speak live with clinicians and mental health experts around the clock. The idea for the new center was spawned by a University of Colorado Depression Center evaluation of Pitkin County's mental health crises, conducted last year.

The university study found that locals in mental health trouble often could not find fast and effective treatment with the available resources in Aspen. The Hope Center's primary aim, said AVMF director Kris Marsh, is to quell that problem and serve as a centralized hub for people with mental health issues.

"It has been frustrating for people because nobody has served as a clearing house in the past," Marsh said. "That's what we're providing. You will never have to leave a message and wonder if someone is going to call you back ... . When we talk to people we can specifically address what they need. We can refer them to therapists to identify their needs, rather than have them call a list of 10 people."

To explain how the Hope Center is operating, Marsh broke down the scenario of a mother with a child who suddenly grows depressed and won't get out of bed. The mother could call the center and talk with a therapist, she said, to explain the issue. If the center deemed the situation a crisis, they would send their new mobile crisis team to the scene. Then they could provide immediate counseling, stabilize the patient, and then follow up with them daily and prescribe long-term treatment if necessary.

If the situation is not deemed a crisis, the center will refer callers to local private and public mental health professionals.

In more volatile or potentially violent situations, local law enforcement will be available to assist the Hope Center, as they did Tuesday evening on one of their very first calls for help.

The half-time staff of four clinicians and four support staffers, as well as rent for their office, is being paid for with \$100,000 from the AVMF coffers. Marsh said the center is on track to eventually become its own free-standing nonprofit entity.

Last year's Aspen depression study highlighted establishing a central mental health center as a primary need, but also called for community education on suicide prevention. To that end, the Hope Center is planning to launch a series of suicide prevention training classes later this summer. Local first responders underwent that training last year, and the center now plans to offer classes to the public.

"The suicide rate is very high in this community," Marsh said, "and we have a high amount of drug and alcohol abuse. We want to make sure we help those people who live here to navigate through this and get the help they need."

The Aspen Hope Center is now fielding calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 970-925-5858.

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