

ANDALUSIA STAR NEWS

Mental illness awareness crucial

Published 3:00am Saturday, October 6, 2012

Mental illness knows no boundaries and that's why local mental health officials are celebrating Mental Health Awareness Week beginning tomorrow.

Staci Wilson of South Central Alabama Mental Health Center said MIAW is a time to learn about serious mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

"Mental illness is a medical illness – it does not discriminate," she said. "In fact, one in four Americans will experience a serious mental disorder in his or her lifetime. In this election year, it's worth remembering that mental illness can affect Republicans, Democrats and independent voters alike. It's not a partisan issue, but does involve every concern, from the economy, to budget priorities."

Since 2009, states have cut mental health service by \$1.6 billion, and at the same time the need has increased, she said.

Mental illnesses can intensely disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood and ability to relate to others. These illnesses can affect anyone despite age, race, religion or socioeconomic status, but on average, have very high treatment success rates.

Still there are certain life events that can directly affect a person.

For example, unemployed people have been four times more likely to report symptoms of severe mental illnesses than others, and Americans who experienced involuntary changes in employment status, such as pay cuts or reduced hours, were twice as likely.

According to the Alabama Department of Mental Health, not only do one in four adults experience mental health issues, but more than one in 17 live with a serious, chronic mental illness.

"The need also is increasing as our troops return home from Iraq and Afghanistan, some with 'hidden wounds.' They must not be forgotten in the years ahead," Wilson said.

Wilson said that treatment works and saves lives, but only if people have access to it.

When mental health care isn't available in a community, the results often are lost jobs and careers, broken families, more homelessness, more welfare, and much more expensive costs for hospital emergency rooms, nursing homes, schools, police and even courts, jails and prisons.

“Early identification of symptoms and treatment, results in better outcomes,” Wilson said.

“Many people in our community are directly affected by mental illnesses,” said Dr. Beverly Bell-Shambley, associate commissioner of ADMH’s division of mental health and substance abuse services. “The good news is treatment works and recovery is possible.”

Less than one-third of adults and less than one-half of children with diagnosed illness receive treatment.

“During Mental Illness Awareness Week, let’s talk with friends and neighbors about mental illness and recovery,” Wilson said. “Learn the facts and end the myths. Together, let’s break the stigma.”

“The U.S. Surgeon General has reported that stigma is a major barrier to people seeking help when they need it,” Bell-Shambley said. “That’s why MIAW is so important. The more people know, the better they can help themselves or help their loved ones get the help and support they need. By changing attitudes about mental illness, we can change lives.”