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Mental health interventionists help troubled teens, but more is needed

The Medford School District's efforts to reach out to troubled students in middle and high school is a much-needed response to a growing problem. More needs to be done — not just by school districts but by state mental health programs as well — but the schools' efforts are invaluable.



COMMENT



The Medford School District's efforts to reach out to troubled students in middle and high school is a much-needed response to a growing problem. More needs to be done — not just by school districts but by state mental health programs as well — but the schools' efforts are invaluable.

The Medford School Board allocated \$200,000 last spring to hire mental health interventionists — specially trained people who meet with students needing help — for North, South and Central Medford high schools, as well as Hedrick and McLoughlin middle schools.

The need is undeniable. Jackson County mental health officials say they are seeing a dramatic increase in calls from people younger than 18 to the county's mental health crisis hotline. The frequency of calls from young people has increased from one or two calls a month to two or three a week.

As Mail Tribune reporter Teresa Thomas details in a story in today's newspaper, the district's new interventionists say a large proportion of the students they see report thoughts of suicide or other forms of self-harm, or are concerned about a friend having these thoughts. Often, the students are coping with problems at home such as abuse and neglect or parents struggling with drug or alcohol dependency.

It's unfortunate that schools must fulfill what is essentially a public health issue, but it makes sense for districts to provide help at school, where students spend much of their time, and to help youths cope with problems that directly interfere with their education.

Counseling, help with coping strategies and just offering a safe, confidential place and a willing ear goes a long way with troubled teenagers, but those who are in crisis and who pose an immediate risk of harming themselves are referred to the hospital emergency room. That's where the lack of adequate mental health services is most acute.

Asante Rogue Regional Medical Center has only a two-room psychiatric care unit in the ER available for patients younger than 18. The only two pediatric psychiatric units in the entire state are in Portland.

And the demand is soaring.

Between 2008 and 2012, the number of people under 18 receiving mental health services at the hospital climbed 149 percent, and those needing to be held overnight went up 63 percent.

Given those numbers, the Oregon Legislature should take a hard look next year at increasing funding for adolescent mental health treatment statewide.