



# ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Experts in Collier praise  
community's progress.

STORY BY JENNIFER REED

If you were a child in Collier County several years ago, your outlook for mental health care looked something like this:

- » A third of those needing residential care weren't in a program.
- » Half of those needing substance abuse treatment weren't getting it.
- » A third of those requiring outpatient therapy didn't receive any.

That's what University of Florida researchers discovered in a 2005 study commissioned by the **Naples Children and Education Foundation**, the philanthropists who founded the **Naples Winter Wine Festival**. The study's findings for school readiness, medical and dental care, academic achievement and after-school care were similarly alarming, prompting a communitywide effort to improve the lives of Collier's vulnerable families.

On the mental health front, several organizations including the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the David Lawrence Center, the school district and the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida teamed up and created a program dubbed "HUGS," or Collier Health Under Guided Systems. It's a communitywide effort to identify kids who need help, guide them through the healthcare system, help pay for treatment, educate the community and support families.

It starts with screening. NAMI dispatches staff members to various child-centered organizations to screen children for mental health problems. They aren't diagnosing on site, of course, but they are checking for red flags that indicate kids may need professional help.

Twenty percent of those screened need some sort of

follow-up, says Kathryn Leib-Hunter, executive director of NAMI Collier County.

In the past, families might have only received a phone number to a treatment center. Now they're assigned to "system navigators," NAMI staffers who help ensure they get an appointment with the right provider, get medications if needed, and when necessary, accompany families to places like the David Lawrence Center, which treats mental illnesses. The organizations are making sure they communicate to relieve the "fragmentation" seen prior to the program's inception, Leib-Hunter says.

And because mental health treatment can be hard to find, the NCEF agreed to pay the salaries for a new psychiatrist and nurse practitioner at the David Lawrence Center and a private counselor to help manage the flow of newly identified children. There's also a "telepsychiatrist" who sees young patients remotely, which helps families who have transportation challenges and teens who feel more comfortable talking via Web cam than face-to-face.

When HUGS started in 2009, Leib-Hunter worried that the stigma of mental illness might dissuade families from getting their children screened. The opposite proved true, she says.

"They know something is different – something is not right," she says.

For Epseia Tersy, there was no mistaking the signs of schizophrenia in her son. Her brother had the disease.

"He would say, 'I hear voices at school,'" Tersy says. "I tell you it's the most scariest thing."

Tersy says she is grateful for HUGS because she had lost her job and her grandmother that

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same year, which created considerable financial and emotional stress for the family.

NAMI staff members helped her find and pay for treatment. They accompanied her to special education meetings at school. Tersy, in turn, worked with them to produce an educational video aimed at pediatricians, school staff and other parents.

The program has offered counseling for her two other children, support meetings and social get-togethers so that the family can meet others battling the same kinds of illnesses.

"You're not alone," Tersy says. "I'm just so happy to see this in Naples."

There's still much work to be done, Leib-Hunter says. The community still lacks, for example, therapists who accept Medicaid and who speak Creole. There's a need for behavioral therapies for children who struggle with social skills but who don't fall into the "autism spectrum." Lack of transportation and Internet access remains problematic for many families, and even with NCEF funding, medication costs remain a challenge, she says.

But Leib-Hunter and others involved in mental health care agree that the county has made major strides in the last three years.

"Children's psychiatric and learning issues often go unrecognized and untreated, but we know that early identification and treatment can be life-changing for children and for their families," says NCEF chairwoman Anne Welsh McNulty. "With proceeds from the Naples Winter Wine Festival, our trustees have committed over \$10 million to support a comprehensive system of care — education, identification and treatment — for children in Collier County. We have worked closely with a coalition of providers to make this happen, and are encouraged by the progress and the results to date." p. c