

New mental health initiative focused on Native youth

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – A new mental health initiative from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is aiming at a high incidence of serious mental health problems in Indian country, officials said.

Released in July, the new media directive is specifically aimed at young American Indian adults, ages 18 to 25, to talk openly about mental health issues with materials that caregivers hope will spur change about negative attitudes associated with mental illness in tribal communities.

The public service announcements are part of a larger push toward reaching a multicultural audience including Hispanic/Latino, Asian and African American young adults, mental health officials said.

“(We are) Raising awareness that effective treatments for mental illnesses are available and that people recover and can encourage those in need to seek help,” said Pamela Hyde, J.D., SAMHSA administrator. “This outreach to the American Indian community will help open dialogue.”

Efforts are designed to assist facilities like the San Diego American Indian Health Center. At this urban Indian health center, caregivers intertwine programs that instill a strong sense of cultural identity with practical treatment, Naomi Lake, behavioral health director, said.

“It’s difficult to talk about mental health,” Lake said. “People feel safer talking to us.”

With roughly 46,000 Indian residents, the San Diego center places a premium on a culture and wellness model. As a result, they hire native behavioral health staff and design culturally specific programs. This is often a key deficit for Indian people in an urban setting and it affects mental well-being, Lake said.

Mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are impacting young adults at an alarming rate, SAMHSA officials said. In a three-year period from 2004-007, an average of 20.7 of Indians (18 to 25 years) reported significant psychological distress within the last year, according to agency statistics.

Disparities in treatment are often created because factors like poverty, substance abuse and services access, said Rose Weahkee, Indian Health Service public health advisor. In addition to the new campaign, Weahkee said locally driven and tribally-supported programs both help protect Indian families, children and communities. Often issues like suicide and substance abuse go hand-in-hand with mental health issues in Indian Country, officials said.

“I think the important thing is that whatever provider comes across their path, they are culturally competent,” she said. “Collaboration is key.”

Yet despite the high prevalence, only thirty percent or one in three received care within the past year. As a whole, minorities are less likely to receive care for mental issues than their white peers, officials said.

Materials for the new ad campaign were created by an American Indian advertising agency, G & G Advertising and the Ad Council, the radio print and Web banner PSAs route the target audience to its new campaign Web site, www.whatadifference.samhsa.gov/Native. The new site talks about mental illness, how to find help and other related resources.

Creators are hoping the new media campaign will turn around the trend to silence and suffering common in native communities. One part of the campaign addresses being strong and self-reliant as a hindrance to getting assistance in tribal settings. One emphasis is on seeking outside help.

“We are confident that the PSAs will make a difference in American Indian communities and encourage friends to support one another,” said Michael Gray, President and G & G creative director. “We are honored to work on such an important campaign.”

The agency aimed at helping native young adults feel less isolated when facing psychological distress or mental health issues. An electronic version of the brochure, “What a difference a friend makes,” is available on the Web site, officials said. The new SAMHSA campaign follows a similar 2006 push toward minorities.

The PSAs will air in advertising time that will be donated by the media, officials said.

“This multicultural advertising effort will help decrease the stereotypes surrounding mental illnesses while providing young adults with the resources they need to support their friends living with mental health problems,” said Peggy Conlon, president and CEO of the Ad Council.

Meanwhile, in San Diego, the statistics on Indian mental health are troubling, officials said. With overall fiscal problems in California, behavioral health officials view the new federal ad campaign as a booster shot for a lingering issue.

“We have statistics that are not in our favor,” Lake said.