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Mental Health Board launches veterans initiative

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McHENRY – The McHenry County Mental Health Board invites the community to learn about the Lake County and McHenry County partnership to transform mental health services for veterans.

A meeting will be from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Nov. 10 at the Shah Center of McHenry County College, 4100 W. Shamrock Lane, McHenry.

Sandy Lewis, executive director of the county mental health board, and Theodore Testa, director of Behavioral Health Services for the Lake County Health Department, will present an overview of the Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration grant.

The panel presentation includes Sean Grimes, who was recalled from service in 2007 after a second deployment; his wife, Michelle, an advocate for military families; Mike Iwanicki, superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of McHenry County; and Alan Belcher, executive director of Transitional Living Services, a program for veterans.

The terms of this grant, which provides \$734,500 a year for five years, stipulate that veterans and their families guide the development of services. Testa, the project director, and Lewis, McHenry County project facilitator, are in the process of assembling a 21-member governing council to provide overarching leadership for the project. SAMHSA specifies that 51 percent of the council is composed of veteran consumers.

“We know from our involvement in Family CARE, a SAMHSA-funded Children’s Mental Health Transformation cooperative agreement, that we need the direct voices of veterans and family members to help us determine the best services and the most appropriate way to deliver those services,” Lewis said.

In addition to filling spaces on the governance council, Lewis is seeking volunteers to serve on a McHenry County advisory group to lead local education and awareness activities, to aid in identifying additional social service needs, and to assist in evaluating local goal outcomes.

“We hope that this event inspires our community members to get involved,” Lewis said.

SAMHSA’s objective is to provide better care for veterans and their families, especially but not limited to those involved with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Any veteran, guardsman, reservist, or their families will be eligible for services.

The grant calls for training community providers on the latest and most effective methods of treatment for trauma, especially trauma caused by war.

Other areas of attention include military sexual abuse, the reduction of military stigma in the pursuit of behavioral health services, and the establishment of a veterans' court to deflect incarceration.

Major goals include reduction of veteran homelessness, suicide prevention, and reduction of hospitalizations. The grant also requires an outreach component that promotes early intervention and the principles of recovery.