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Gulf Bend recovers after cuts to funding

Mental health center has reduced waiting list and caught up on treatment

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BY GABE SEMENZA - VICTORIA ADVOCATE

On the high end of her bipolar disorder, Ann Thomas spent money and drank. She felt euphoric and lived promiscuously.

On the low end, the disorder crippled the 46-year-old Cuero woman. She'd rarely leave the house, shower or even brush her teeth.

Like so many who don't receive the mental health care and medication they need, Thomas struggled to hold a job, and she eventually wound up in jail. She served time for a nonviolent crime.

If it hadn't been for the eradication of a waiting list with hundreds of the area's uninsured and mentally ill earlier - created because of massive 2003 state mental health funding cuts - she might again be behind bars, or worse, she said.

But now a local mental health center has caught up and is treating those who need it most and saving taxpayers thousands of dollars on the back end, David Way said.

Way is Gulf Bend Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center's director of operations. He said those massive 2003 funding cuts - about a half-million dollars to the center - forced Gulf Bend's leaders to reduce services and to think outside the box to compensate.

At its worst, the waiting list grew to include 400 area uninsured and mentally ill adults and children.

Way said he and others compensated for the budget cuts by showing county government and business leaders that they'd receive a return on their investment if they funded treatment.

The plan worked. Gulf Bend, which provides treatment to residents in the seven-county Crossroads area, received a 41-percent increase in county contributions, or more than \$360,000, its 2006 annual report, released just recently, shows.

Those contributions fund the treatment of more than 800 uninsured and mentally ill patients a month, roughly 200 more per month than the center could treat this time last year, Way said.

"It means there are fewer of these people sitting in jail. It means that our community will be healthier as a result of it. It means these people will go on to contribute to society," Way said.

He said many who go untreated end up in jail or in emergency rooms where it's costly to house or care for them, further tugging at taxpayers' wallets.

Victoria Police Chief Bruce Ure agrees.

"The treatment of mental illnesses on the front end decreases the burden on society on the backend," Ure said Tuesday.

Like Way, Ure said when the mentally ill are not treated there is a direct increase in homelessness, criminal activity and narcotics use.

"If (Gulf Bend wasn't) there, our business would increase tenfold," he said, adding that law enforcement is "probably one

of the greatest supporters" of mental health care providers.

Dr. Jim Brand is a supporter, too. He is the medical director of the emergency department at DeTar Healthcare System's Navarro Street campus.

"Competent and adequate mental health care to the community is a tremendous help for everyone," Brand said.

He said it's common for the mentally ill who end up in the ER to have hurt themselves. They can be disoriented, psychotic and, in some cases, suicidal.

So Gulf Bend, Brand said, "Is a huge help to us."

The treatment the center offers also helps a community's economy, Way said.

"Over 60 percent of adults with mental illness who get regular outpatient care go on to achieve gainful employment," Way said. "That's the heart of it all."

So the heart of Gulf Bend's approach to convincing area governments and businesses to contribute more money to mental health treatment was simple: It costs about \$900 a year to offer regular outpatient care to a patient like Thomas. But it costs \$40,000 for a 90-day tax-funded stay in a state hospital, a last alternative for some who don't get the regular care they need.

The care has renewed Thomas' hopes for her life.

"Without it, I would be without medication, and I'd be right back into my old ways - right back on the streets, the very promiscuous behavior, the drinking ..." she said. "The medication helps so much. I would like to get a job that I'm qualified for, even though I have a record - be a productive member of society. Yes, that would be wonderful."

Gabe Semenza is a reporter for the Advocate. Contact him at 361-580-6519 or gsemenza@vicad.com, or comment on this story [here](#).