

## Indian River's mental health walk-in center seeing patient increase

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY ? A recent study released by Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh suggests there's more stress in people's lives today than 25 years ago.

In the study, researchers found stress was up 18 percent for women and 24 percent for men from 1983 to 2009.

That comes as no surprise to Kris Sarkauskas, president and CEO of the Mental Health Association in Indian River County. She's seen the number of patients at the Mental Health Association's Walk-In Center triple since 2007, going from 600 in 2007 to 2,000 in 2011.

"I think awareness of mental illness is definitely up," said Sarkauskas. "People are really learning that it's OK to get help."

At the walk-in center, several new patients come each day, looking for assistance with problems including depression, anxiety, relationship issues and substance abuse. The clinic now has a patient base of 375 that receive services on a regular basis.

"We try to make people feel comfortable when they come here," Sarkauskas said. "We have a team of high-quality professionals who bring a lot to the table and can offer the best possible advice right away."

Other local agencies in Indian River County also offer affordable mental health services. Treasure Coast Community Health now provides counseling services on a low cost, sliding scale. And the Center for Emotional and Behavioral Health at Indian River Medical Center provides inpatient psychiatric and substance abuse services for those in need.

There are no restrictions on services provided at the walk-in center each weekday between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. People are seen every day without an appointment, and without insurance or other means to pay. Sarkauskas said the program receives funds from the Indian River Hospital District to cover indigent care, but about 20 percent of the center's funding is from private donations.

In June, local philanthropist Barbara Hurley contributed \$20,000 to the Mental Health Association to ensure immediate access to emotional and behavioral health care through the walk-in center. Hurley has supported the walk-in center annually since it first opened in 2007.

The walk-in center's clinical director and psychologist Irene Acosta and medical director Dr. Erwin Ramos are bilingual. Case managers also are fluent in Creole and sign language for the hearing-impaired.

At a ceremony last April, 15 graduates of the walk-in center were proud to show how far they had progressed over the 18-month program. Rachel Tall, who suffered through sexual abuse, divorce, homelessness and unemployment, said the walk-in center made the difference for her.

"Through this program, I was able to realize that having a mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of," Tall said at graduation. "I learned to love Rachel again."

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Mental Health Association's Walk-In Center is at 820 37th Place in Vero Beach. For more information, log on to [www.mhairc.org](http://www.mhairc.org) or call 772-569-9788.