

## Guidance Center to open new Integrated Care facility

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Staff Reporter

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The Verde Valley Guidance Clinic has about 2,000 clients throughout the Verde Valley and Sedona. About 700 to 800 of those patients are classified, according to the state definition, as Seriously Mentally Ill (SMI).

Studies have found that those diagnosed seriously mentally ill also tend to not care for their physical health.

That condition will change when the Clinic officially opens its new Integrated Care center next week.



According to a report published in the Institute of Medicine, "Very rarely do mental health and substance use problems exist in isolation. The conditions frequently co-occur along with a medical illness such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes and neurological illnesses." A Surgeon General's report quotes findings that suggest that those with serious behavioral health conditions experience earlier death as a result of under-treated medical conditions

Richard Dehnert of the Guidance Clinic says, "The population with SMI has a life expectancy 25 years less than the rest of the population. They frequently don't have access to, or avail themselves of, primary care, the general family care in which you find

out that your are in danger of getting diabetes or having high blood pressure."

"There is now a national movement to integrate primary care and psychiatric care. The typical way that is done is that somebody from the behavioral care facility goes to the primary care setting which takes referrals."

The Verde Valley Guidance Clinic is changing that model and facing the problem head-on.

The Guidance Clinic has recently completed a new facility that not only cares for their behavioral issues, but also cares for their primary health issues.

"In this case, we have brought the primary health people to the behavioral health setting where they would actually go into a doctors office, have an examination, if they need a prescription drugs or medicines to control the diabetes or hypertension of whatever, they can

get it and we will have a pharmacy."

The large imposing building designed by Steve Biasini and Renee Stevens is structurally two halves. The left side supports the primary care physicians, equipment and pharmacy. The right side supports the behavioral care physicians.

On the second floor are the Quality Improvement people and technology equipment and staff.

The primary care services will be supplied by Dr. Scott Bingham's Urgent Care organization nearby. Initially it will be staffed one day a week until demand warrants.

"This project is not designed to take a "shotgun" approach to spreading out behavioral staff to identify the behavioral health needs of clients presenting in primary care doctor's offices," notes Robert Cartia, CEO of the Guidance Clinic. "This project seeks to serve those clients already identified and in the behavioral health system, thereby promoting a more focused and effective approach."

Cartia continued, "The essential concept is that currently enrolled AHCCCS eligible SMI (seriously mentally ill) patients will have the opportunity to receive psychiatric care and primary medical care at the same office while also having counseling, case management and crisis services available at the same campus.

"The key feature beyond access is flexibility and ease of coordination of care between primary health and psychiatry. The opportunities for study and research are enormous."

Tom DeStefano, of Northern Arizona University's Education Department, plans to track the operation.

"We may be a unique model," says Dehnert. "I know that no one else in Arizona is doing this the same way we are and there may not be anyone else in the country."

Two and a half years ago, the VVGC opened its residential facility that is gender-specific for women with a diagnosis of Serious Mentally Ill and Substance Abuse.