

Big Island kids get mental health help

A new project will help meet the demands of a federal court decree

BY HELEN ALTON
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A state-private project is to begin tomorrow on the Big Island to develop better ways of providing mental health services to children.

An estimated 400 Big Island children and adolescents need mental health services, said Richard Munger, chief of the state Health Department's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division.

Kapiolani HealthHawaii won a nine-month contract with the state Health Department to administer the program.

It's a significant step toward meeting demands of the Felix vs. Waihee consent decree, Munger said.

The federal court order requires comprehensive improvements to the mental health and education system for disabled children.

"We wanted to just go to one place and see if we could, with a modest amount of money, try to fundamentally change how services are delivered to address major barriers that keep the system from working," Munger said.

The Big Island was chosen, he said, because it already had a committee representing concerned interests working on child mental health issues.

A public-private partnership also fit with recommendations to privatize Big Island mental health

services, Munger said.

The Kapiolani team, based at Waimea, includes Kapiolani psychiatrist Gerald Correa as medical director; Linda Fox, clinical director; and Allen Novak, executive director.

The island's four Children's Community Councils will have a big role in developing the system, Munger said, noting, "One of the hallmarks of the consent decree is that it not just be a top-down system."

The councils were involved in interviewing for staff and Kapiolani put two representatives of each council on its policy board, Munger said.

All children needing services will be referred to Kapiolani, which will subcontract with private agencies to evaluate children and provide treatment, he said.

A care coordinator will be assigned to each child to ensure he or she gets appropriate care integrated with other services.

The Legislature appropriated \$2.8 million for the demonstration project, making a total of about \$5.5 million available for Big Island child mental health services, Munger said.

He expects the greatest barrier will be finding enough services because of a shortage of mental health providers and programs in Hawaii, especially on the neighbor islands.

One of KHH's responsibilities will be to recruit providers. As a stopgap, Munger said, "We may have to fly a few people over to the Big Island to provide services."

In developing the partnership, Munger said, "We basically jury-rigged around some of the state

bureaucracy."

Kapiolani will be able to cut check in 30 minutes or produce contract in 24 hours — "thing that are absolutely impossible for me," Munger said.

"With this flexibility, the major constraint will be getting services," he said.

It will take about a year to determine if the project is working and is worth expanding to other islands, Munger said.

Munger said the project is "extraordinary" because it was conceived and planned in 10 months by many people doing an enormous amount of work.

"It gives us a feeling we're at least demonstrating clearly to the court we are taking this seriously, we know what we're doing and we have a plan," he said. "But we can't do everything at once."