Opinion: Time to address mental illness

By Brian Uhler

Last month, the city manager and City Council hosted a strategic planning session with all city departments to ensure we are coordinated and pulling together to address key community issues. Community wellness is one such focus area.

On a daily basis, South Lake Tahoe police officers respond to calls for service involving people who are in a mental health crisis. All too often, the services available to such people are limited, especially when those calls occur in the middle of the night. Sometimes these people also commit crime and are arrested, then put into the jail for the crimes they commit.

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In March, Barton Memorial Hospital and the Lake Tahoe Unified School District hosted a mental health forum which included over 80 people who are community leaders or work in the mental health arena. This effort is well under way with plans to bolster community awareness, improve organizational responsiveness, and ultimately get people who need support the help they need.

Also in March, El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Suzanne Kingsbury, and officials from SLTPD, El Dorado County Sheriff's Department, El Dorado County Health Department, and

others met to coordinate an effort to obtain a grant to help provide more local support for those with mental health issues. If the grant acquisition effort is successful, more resources will be focused on helping those people who commit crime and also have mental illness.

In South Lake Tahoe we experience a suicide rate which is much too high. Health experts also recognize that many with mental health issues also self-medicate with illegal drugs. Consider the following statistics for the City of South Lake Tahoe:

Year	**Suicides**	**Fatal Overdoes**
2012	2	4
2013	3	6
2014	4	11

Obviously, this trend is alarming. In the coming months, mental health authorities are supporting the police department with special crisis intervention training. It is hoped that we can help with turning this around in the coming year by providing better services earlier in the cycle of need.

Now that I have given you some information about things under way, you might ask, “what can I do to help?” In South Lake Tahoe, we are lucky to have many great nonprofits which specialize in supporting those with mental illness. One idea might be to seek out such an organization and offer help. If this doesn’t appeal to you, there may be other opportunities. In the U.S., May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Stay tuned to this topic and I am sure you will learn more specific ways to help.

Lastly, it might be helpful to review this link just in case you have friends or family members you are worried about.

Come January 2016, I will be asking staff to compile these

stats again. Let’s work tirelessly to make sure our friends or family members will not be a sad statistic in the future.

Brian Uhler is chief of police in South Lake Tahoe.