

Food Bank coming to South Lake Tahoe

The Food Bank of El Dorado County will be in South Lake Tahoe to host a free farmers market and mobile food pantry distribution on Aug. 24 from 10-11am at the American Legion Hall.

One allocation per household will be given out. This is for people who are struggling to make ends meet, live in El Dorado County and meet the state income guidelines.

For more information on how to give or get help, call 530.621.9950 or email info@foodbankedc.org.

‘Blob’ may help drought-stricken California

By Joshua Emerson Smith, San Diego Union Tribune

As a series of marine heat waves linked to climate change has thrown ocean ecosystems out of whack from Australia to the coast of California, a cooling trend called La Niña has given scientists hope that water temperatures could come back into balance.

But so far, the cooling weather pattern – predicted to follow as a result of last winter’s El Niño – remains squeezed by warmer ocean temperatures along a narrow stretch of Earth’s equator.

That might be good news for drought-stricken California because La Niña often brings bone-dry winters, when the state has its best chance for substantial rain and snowfall.

Read the whole story

Firm fails to return test scores for 200,000 Nev. students

By Trevon Milliard, Reno Gazette-Journal

For the second year running, Nevada is having major problems with the online standardized tests given to many public school students.

And the state is again threatening legal action against the company paid millions of dollars to administer the tests and return the scores.

Data Recognition Corporation won't give Nevada the individual scores for its 200,000 tested students, who completed their exams in spring 2016, and it won't say why.

Read the whole story

LTUSD board member resigns mid-term

There could be four new Lake Tahoe Unified School District board members this fall.

Ginger Nicolay-Davis resigned effective Aug. 9, while three seats are on the November ballot.

Nicolay-Davis ran unopposed in 2014. Her term was to expire in December 2018. She was not available for comment.

At the Aug. 23 board meeting the remaining members will decide how to go forward with replacing her.

Leaving the board in December is Adam Jones. In March 2015 he was appointed to the seat vacated by Sue Novasel after she became a county supervisor. Annie Davidson and Larry Reilly are running for that seat.

Larry Green is not seeking re-election. The lone candidate for that seat is Troy Matthews.

The other contested seat is incumbent Mike Doyle being challenged by Bonnie Turnbull.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Mt. Tallac hosting community meet-and-greet

Mt. Tallac High School is welcoming more than just students on Aug. 29, the first day of school.

There will be a meet and greet from 10:30-11:30am. The idea is to have students meeting potential employers and other community members, and for adults to interact with the students.

The continuation school is integrating worth ethic and career planning into its curriculum. The goal is for students to be able to join the workforce now or after graduation if college is not their choice.

Mt. Tallac is near the far end of South Tahoe High School's football field; with easiest access off 13th Street.

Mentally ill suspects test law enforcement

Publisher's note: This is one of several stories about mental health issues in the Lake Tahoe Basin that will be running through October. The other stories may be accessed from the Home page under Special Projects, then click on Mental Health.

By Susan Wood

El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Suzanne Kingsbury has learned personally there is no magic pill in terms of eliminating mental illness on our streets and in the judicial system.

Even with her steely resolve, calming demeanor and steady hand on the gavel that delivers justice in South Lake Tahoe, Kingsbury – who serves behind the bench of Behavioral Court among other disciplines – couldn't save her sister from a debilitating struggle with bipolar disorder.

She knew the fatal result of her sister's well being when she got a call from the coroner in Sacramento a few years ago.



"It was heartbreaking," Kingsbury told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Like many, Kingsbury has seen her fair share of people "out there screaming and yelling and pushing shopping carts" barely able to hold onto some semblance of reality.

That's just how cunning mental illness is. Throw in alcohol and drug addiction, and the problem grows like it's on steroids.

"Often there are substance abuse issues. That's when it becomes difficult because you need these people to detox to get to the root of the problem," the longtime judge explained.

Medication can only go so far. With bipolar disorder, aka manic depression, the pharmaceuticals have side effects that prompt many afflicted to want to avoid them. The period of elevated mood counters the down times enough that some people suffering from it don't want to end the up feelings.

"They hate the lows and love the highs," Kingsbury said.

In the 1980s, the bulk of psychiatric hospitals in California closed, leaving the mentally ill to fend for themselves on the streets. When they're brought in, often from an episode with police, they can get an assessment and substance abuse help if necessary.

Transitional housing, including the few units available in South Lake Tahoe, provides for stability in the community for those just seeking another chance at life.

"Without the housing, a lot of folks will do OK for a while then things will go south," Kingsbury said.

Jail is not the housing answer

"Do you know what the largest psychiatric hospital is?" El Dorado County Undersheriff Randy



El Dorado County Undersheriff Randy Peshon recognizes the difficulties his deputies have with suspects who have mental health issues. Photo/Provided

Peshon asked rhetorically, answering: "State prison."

"There is no easy answer. Part of the problems we face is the money we have for mental health is in a silo – some people might not fit the criteria," said Peshon, who worked in the county jail in South Lake Tahoe for years. He now works in Placerville as second in command.

Peshon has viewed the double-edged sword of the mounting

issue. Medical privacy laws have become stricter, while the stigma attached to mental illness has increased. The burden lies heavily on law enforcement trying to quell or at least reduce the perplexing problem.

“If law enforcement is aware somebody is suffering from mental illness, we have officers who are trained in crisis intervention,” Peshon said. “A lot of these situations are brought on because these people go off their meds.”

From the county jail and mental health to the state court system and local beats of police and sheriff’s departments, government continues to wrestle with the crisis.

In many cases, some refuse help. In others, the help fails to go far enough. Some are unaware of the assistance available – and sometimes, the system works for those who work it.

The highs and lows of fighting the good fight are as dramatic as the ups and downs of those struggling with mental illness.

Statewide, there are 112,300 people in California prisons, the Public Policy Institute reported. Last year 83,280 people were in county jails. Estimates are that 15 percent of those incarcerated are mentally ill.

In the entire state, California hospitals have about 7,500 beds, the Los Angeles Times reported in a recent study. The vast majority of these beds – 92 percent – is filled by patients from the criminal justice system and is no longer available for those in need of civil commitment. Only 600 beds are available for those just checking in, to say for example, to help themselves.

In other words, someone suffering from mental illness is apt to fall into law enforcement’s lap to gain safe harbor.

Officers want more tools

The lack of safe places to go represents a tough quandary for

police officers who see the most unpredictable members of society who may either hurt themselves, loved ones or even those who may be passing by.

About a decade ago, a man who appeared to have a psychotic break stood in the middle of the street between the Taqueria and the former *Tahoe Daily Tribune* building and threatened to shoot himself in the head. At times, he laid down as if surrendering but kept a gun in his hand. Bystanders gathered around, exacerbating a pressing issue for police.

South Lake Tahoe SWAT Police Officer Brandon Auxier remembers the episode and points to it as just the tip of the iceberg in what police see almost daily.

"It's a constant problem. We pick them up then sometimes Barton does not have any beds, and they've had to travel hundreds of miles," Auxier said, adding he's noticed more calls lately resulting in "5150s." This term of condition relates to five-point restraints on the person who is suffering a mental breakdown.

"In the last couple of years, we've seen an increase," the officer told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Many of those afflicted with mental illness are homeless. And with the popularity of the new winter warming center in the city, one can see there is a demand for a safe place for these people.

Auxier, a 13-year officer, has seen several repeat calls for those who are endangering themselves or others and create a scene. He's part of a crisis intervention team, which prompts welfare checks on those who go through the county Mental Health program. Once a case is developed, restrictions abound on what caseworkers can do or say because of confidentiality issues.

Balancing the law of the land

And there lies a dilemma for law enforcement.

South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler would like to see more allowable communication between mental health caseworkers and police given the tenuous situations officers and the public are placed in when the call comes in.



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***– South Lake
Tahoe Police Chief Brian
Uhler***

"It's a huge issue. The expectation is for us to manage or know a mental health breakdown. When we know the situation, we can have empathy and some patience. The issue is we face laws that prevent health care professionals from even talking to us," Uhler said. "I've learned that even if we had the psychiatrist involved, we could not even confirm if this person is a patient. So we're stuck out there with no help from the mental health community even if they want to help. It takes a change in state law."

Law enforcement has a balancing act dealing with these calls.

Officers need to turn on a dime in terms of showing control and strength, while gently switching to empathy and heightening their listening skills.

When they pick these people up, some cases end well over time between bringing in the courts, transitional housing, medications, caring loved ones and police welfare checks.

But others break the hearts of officers – especially after they get to know the people behind the case numbers.

El Dorado County sheriff's Sgt. Michael Yarbrough empathizes with Chief Uhler on wanting to gather as much information as possible on someone struggling with mental illness creating a threat in public.

He's seen his fair share of crises as Officer of the Year honored by the National Alliance of Mental Illness.

Like Auxier, the county sheriff's department recognizes Yarbrough as spearheading the county sheriff's response through the CIT program. After all, he had three years on the police force on the rough streets of Stockton before landing in South Lake Tahoe in 1997.

Yarbrough said it's tricky dealing with the mentally ill. Officers need to maintain that sense of control but show it in

a kinder, gentler way. Communication – verbal and non-verbal as in body language – is key.

“It’s a different way of controlling, but you’re still in charge,” he said.

With “off-the-wall” individual behavior, Yarbrough has been trained and is experienced to see the body language and hear the responses of the subject of the call to be able to tell whether someone is undergoing a mental breakdown.

There’s such a new perspective in law enforcement to deal with these calls.

“It’s social services driven now,” Yarbrough said, comparing the situations to the old ways of handling a call where officers would just pick up the parties and throw them in jail to simply get them off the streets.

“Sometimes it would take six hospital visits before (the subjects) get it or for their families to get it,” he said.



El Dorado County sheriff's Sgt. Michael Yarbrough is a leader in his agency when it comes to handling mental health issues. Photo/Susan Wood

Now officers are known to approach an individual with care, passing out pamphlets mentioning resources. Yarbrough reached in his desk drawer and quickly got out a county mental health brochure labeled "Guidelines for calling 911" in the event of a mental health emergency. Within the pamphlet, there's even a script a family member may use to call in a mental health crisis at home. Also included is a list of critical phone numbers of resources.

The sergeant understands the call often doesn't end with one response.

If he doesn't have the answer, a member of a multi-disciplinary team that serves as a local think tank in dealing with mental health cases may have it. The think tank involves law enforcement, county jail, Mental Health Department and Barton Memorial Hospital.

The need is overwhelming. In three years, Yarbrough has seen 1,500 reports go through the system.

"It took some time to get (the caseload) managed," he said.

He analyzed the cases to determine who would be best served by regular visits among his officer force. The dozen deputies who may go out on the welfare checks count medications, sit down with the subject for some positive reinforcement and talk to family members to get a sense of how the person is doing. They also keep an eye on whether clandestine substances appear.

"I'd say about 70-80 percent involve drugs and alcohol," he said.

Yarbrough has become so keenly aware of the human condition he's become an expert in the topic. He's been invited to speak

about the programs at a mental health conference in September in Sacramento.

“I can’t give enough credit to the whole collaboration. (The sheriff’s department) wouldn’t be able to do this on our own,” he said.

Beyond the agency resources, Yarbrough relies heavily on caring, knowledgeable family members.

Mental illness is a tricky condition to deal with because it comes with a stigma and emotions attached. Sometimes family members are reluctant to say something or intervene because they’re afraid of offending the loved one.

California AB1424, signed into law in 2015, requires any person who is authorized to have a person taken into custody for involuntary treatment consider available relevant information about the historical nature of the person’s mental disorder.

Upon the CIT visits, waivers are signed enabling family members to make critical decisions on the subject’s behalf. There’s a long questionnaire asking for information detailing the loved one’s historical condition, with a list of phone numbers to contact in the event of a crisis.

Yarbrough sees the slow-moving legislative changes as long in coming and necessary to a person’s well being because there is no easy fix.

“Why do we think the brain is the only thing completely immune to illness?” the sergeant asked. “That’s the hardest thing for people to understand.”

Help for those who help

The need to assist the mentally ill on the streets prompted retired San Rafael police Officer Joel Fay to make a business out of training officers to handle their calls.

The Marin County town has a plaguing homeless population with many classified as mentally ill.

"I thought: 'Where do these people go?'" he said.

He found a way to balance being a police officer and psychologist.

"I knew that police needed to change the way we respond to calls," he said. "For me, it was kind of like a mission in life."

He moved into the field of psychology before fully retiring from the force five years ago. He contracts with counties to bring his specific expertise to their law enforcement units.

El Dorado County, which included Yarbrough, is among the jurisdictions that hired Fay's business to assist them.

Fay trains the officers to look for signs of psychotic behavior such as the subjects reacting to other stimuli. There are clues of what to look for – whether they "see" the officer, can they feel the officer's presence and do they comply with requests. If they can't meet any of the criteria, there are other forces at work in the subject's brain.

"At that time, the officer knows to slow it down and make them come around to their way of thinking," he said.

There are also telltale signs of depression the psychologist trains officers to look for.

"There are things to say to work with these people. I tell (the officers) that it's important for you to stay calm," he said. "I tell them to pretend like it's someone you know."

Fay admits it takes a while for law enforcement to change their frame of mind on dealing with these types of scenarios.

"The goal of the training is to show how to use less force and

for officers and the citizens to get hurt less," he said.

Granted, the approach sounds simple and inroads are being made to treat the mentally ill differently. However, there are still cracks in the overall system.

Fay was empathetic to Uhler's complaints about not having enough information to keep all involved safe from harm. He echoed the chief's sentiment about the need to change the laws.

"There are so many road blocks. One problem is the law requires a person to be in imminent danger to get some help," Fay told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It's very frustrating because frequently we're not allowed to collaborate."

Mental health on the case

Sabrina Owen, the manager of the county's mental health programs, sympathized with law enforcement wanting more information readily available on mental health cases. However, she reminded that privacy laws override the need to find an easier way to deal with public displays from those afflicted with a mental illness.

"It's nice that family members can always call. We can take phone calls all day long and take information, but we can't acknowledge a case or give it out unless a patient signs a consent form," she said.

Nonetheless, the programs set into place seem to be working if one looks at the numbers.

Despite what law enforcement projects, mental health evaluations between jurisdictions in the city and county have trended downward in the last few years.

The sheriff's department in South Lake Tahoe reported 543 cases assigned to subjects for 2014; 501 in 2015; and halfway through 2016 lists 187.

South Lake Tahoe 5150 evaluations number 404 in 2014; 381 the following year; and to date this year show 160.

Owen attributes the drop in statistics to the combined efforts of the CIT consortium and other similar programs.

The mental health professional views the well-being checks as a tried and true way of keeping a careful eye on people who face the very large swings in life's ups and downs.

Owen strongly supports the idea of intensive case management. This means tracking the subject's medication, meeting with the person and urging family and group therapy.

"And in respect to law enforcement as first responders, (the mentally ill) would just like to know someone cares," she said.

Opinion: The word of the summer is 'victoriotic'

By Joe Mathews

It's the word of the summer: Victoriotic.

You won't find it in the Oxford English Dictionary, at least not yet.



Joe Mathews

It began its life as an epithet, hurled at me by my 7-year-old son.

“Don’t be victoriotic!”

I was guilty as charged. I had finally broken a long losing streak against him in the board game “Sequence.” And I celebrated like a Super Bowl-winning quarterback, wagging my finger, dancing, and sticking out my tongue at the vanquished second-grader.

In other words, I had taken the state of being victorious too far. I had over-celebrated the win. I was so immature, even a 7-year-old noticed.

In my own defense, I’m not the only one being victoriotic these days.

The news media is thoroughly dominated by Patient Zero of the victoriotic epidemic—Donald Trump. He’s constantly rubbing his primary victories, his wealth, his hot wife in everyone’s faces.

Of course, he’s both a politician and absurdly rich—two major risk factors for victoriotic behavior. It’s now standard political strategy to blow any victory, no matter how small, into D-Day proportions in the name of “winning” the ever-shrinking news cycle.

And the rich? While it may be hard to believe, there once was a time when the wealthy downplayed their good fortune. Now much of America runs on the victoriotic speeches, books, and philanthropy of billionaires, who tell the world how great the rest of us can be if we would only heed their advice on whatever topic they imagine themselves to be experts in: education, science, environmentalism, media, sports, politics, space travel.

California, with more than its share of rich people and politicians, is our victoriotic global capital. And nobody does victoriotic like the Bay Area, with its new money tech giants. Our social media platforms basically exist for victoriotic pronouncements—about professional accomplishments, vacations, volunteerism and winsome children and pets.

Still, Silicon Valley lags Hollywood in victoriotic behavior (if little else), which was long ago institutionalized by a culture where every actor is a star, every film is a hit and everybody is feeling “better than ever.” Just ask them.

California’s public sector is also experiencing a victorioticism bubble.

We are bragging about our job growth and the ever-larger global profile of our economy (and not talking so much about the Census Bureau’s supplementary poverty measure showing that, accounting for the cost of living and public benefits, we have America’s highest incidence of poverty). Our elected officials constantly tout our leading role in fighting climate change (even as the state’s cap-and-trade regime threatens to fall apart). Our public universities are always described as the world’s best (even as they charge more, and provide less). We congratulate ourselves on our open-mindedness about immigrants because we offer drivers’ licenses for the undocumented and health benefits for undocumented children (even as millions of undocumented Californians live in the shadows).

This summer has brought great anxiety about the popular anger in the state and in the country, about the less fortunate lashing back at the more fortunate. Is the reason for the populist backlash the inequality itself? Or is it the endless victoriotic laps being run by society’s winners—on the plethora of media platforms that make the most fortunate among us more in-your-face visible than ever before?

Victoriotic behavior has many motivations. People seek validation, credibility, attention, celebrity, vindication, and even love. Or they may be expressing deep insecurities, as Trump does when he exaggerates his billions. Medical research suggests that human beings exaggerate our victories because of our brain chemistry; victorioticism feels good to us, at least for a while.

But I wonder whether living in a big state makes people feel they need to scream about even the slightest wins just to get noticed. There is so much competition—for jobs, for schools, for mates, for parking spots—that you have to be competing, to be winning, at all times. If you're not victoriotic, you're not trying. You may even be made to feel like you're losing.

One school of thought is that this epidemic, like so many other social maladies, is the product of the ways we're parenting our children now. In the second decade of the 21st century, every major moment of our children's lives can be documented with a phone, and shared, victoriotically, with friends, family and the whole world.

My son is annoyed by this, quite intensely. He calls out adult behavior for being victoriotic, and is careful not to make victoriotic statements himself.

Maybe you shouldn't do a column about my word, he tells me. It would be victoriotic to brag about your son coining the term, he adds.

Yes, it would, kid. And I just did it anyway.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.

Sierra sequoias respond to water stress

By Robert Kuo, Sacramento Bee

The leaves atop giant sequoias in the Sierra Nevada are better at storing water than those closer to the ground, an adaptation that may explain how their treetops are able to survive 300 feet in the air, researchers at American River College and Humboldt State University have found.

“It can take over a week for water to get from the ground to the top of the tree,” says Alana Chin, who led the study and is an instructor at American River College in Sacramento. “When you’re that tall of a tree, you’re under tremendous water stress.”

Chin and her colleagues used ropes to climb the trees and collect samples. They found that leaves higher up the tree have less surface area and more transfusion tissue compared to leaves near the trunk. These traits give leaves more succulence, or ability to store water, which serves as a buffer against a water deficit that would otherwise damage the shoot system.

Read the whole story

Revamping community colleges to improve graduation rates

By Alina Tugend, New York Times

Offer students a less confusing array of courses.

Require fewer remedial classes to improve students' basic math and English skills. Or find a way to pair these not-for-credit courses with others that would provide progress toward a degree.

Provide more personal advice.

And lower the cost.

While some of these steps might seem more obvious than others, they are among the changes community colleges across the country are making in hopes of ensuring that more students graduate.

Read the whole story

Mammoth man guilty of looting Nev. artifacts

By Marcella Corona, Reno Gazette-Journal

A Mammoth Lakes doctor faces up to two years in prison and a hefty fine after pleading guilty to illegally looting about 20,000 Native American artifacts from Nevadan prehistoric sites for more than two decades.

Jonathan Cornelius Bourne, 59, an anesthesiologist at Mammoth Hospital, pleaded guilty Tuesday to 21 felony counts of transporting archaeological resources and excavating, removing, damaging or defacing those resources, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in California.

Read the whole story