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Fighting opioid addiction: Western Sierra Medical Clinic awarded \$759,000 grant for treatment program

by Emily Lavin



Dr. Christina Lasich, left, medical director for Community Recovery Resources, and Dr. Heather Lucas-Ross, chief physician at Western Sierra Medical Clinic. Lasich will run the clinic's new medication-assisted program to treat opioid addiction, developed by the clinic with the aid of a \$759,000 federal grant.

Western Sierra Medical Clinic is getting a financial boost from the federal government to implement a medication-assisted program to treat opioid addiction in Nevada and Sierra counties.

The clinic, located at 844 Old Tunnel Road in Grass Valley, was recently awarded a \$759,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; it was one of more than 271 health centers across the nation to receive a share of \$94 million from the federal agency for treating addiction to heroin and prescription drugs.

The grant will be distributed over two years. Western Sierra will also be investing \$320,000 of its own funding into the development of the program.

“Our single goal is to make sure those people that are addicted [to opioids] are titrated off those addictions and get into a healthier lifestyle,” said Scott McFarland, the clinic’s chief executive officer.

The medication-assisted treatment program will be directed by Dr. Christina Lasich, who serves as the medical director at Community Recovery Resources, or CoRR, a Grass Valley-based nonprofit offering recovery and wellness services.

“Our single goal is to make sure those people that are addicted [to opioids] are titrated off those addictions and get into a healthier lifestyle.” Scott McFarland, chief executive officer of Western Sierra Medical Clinic.

McFarland said the clinic plans to develop the new program over the next three months; the first step toward that process, he said, is meeting with county officials and other community partners to decide exactly what the program will look like, and whether it will be operated solely on-site at the clinic or off-site in partnership with another agency.

One particular area of focus for the grant-funded program will be teen outreach, McFarland said. Some of the federal money awarded to the clinic will allow it to hire a teen liaison, who will focus on reaching out to the area’s younger residents to educate them about early intervention and recovery services.

Clinic officials see the medication-assisted program as another way to combat opioid addiction, which they characterized as a growing problem in the region.

“It’s certainly an issue we’ve dealt with year after year, and it doesn’t seem to be getting any better,” McFarland said.

According to the California Department of Public Health, Nevada County had the fifth-highest rate of non-fatal emergency room visits related to opioids in 2013. In 2014, the emergency room at Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital handled 138 opioid-related cases, compared to 27 in 2011, according to figures obtained by Western Sierra Medical Clinic.

In 2013, there were 1,800 opioid-related deaths in California, according to the state department of health. Nationwide, opioids were involved in the deaths of 28,000 people in 2014, and opioid overdoses have quadrupled since 2000, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

“A lot of our patients unwittingly become dependent or addicted [to opioids],” said Dr. Heather Lucas-Ross, the chief physician at Western Sierra Medical Clinic. “It isn’t just the perceived junkie on the corner or the person you see showing up every other week. It’s friends, neighbors, professionals, parents.”

Opioid addiction can be a “huge struggle” to overcome, Lucas-Ross said. The medication-assisted program will be another way to help patients succeed in completing the addiction recovery process.

“As providers, we love to have the opportunity to identify early what the needs are, and intervene with a real tool,” Lucas-Ross said.

The grant-funded program will allow the clinic to focus on more holistic treatment of its patients — an approach the clinic has been actively pursuing as its model of care, McFarland said. He noted that in 2014, Western Sierra established an off-site clinic at CoRR, a partnership designed to help patients access primary care, mental health and recovery services at one location.

The grant-funded program will help further the Western Sierra’s ability to provide patients struggling with opioid addiction with that multi-pronged care, Lucas-Ross said, rather than simply referring them to an outside recovery program and hoping they enter into it.

“We’re feeling really empowered to be able to take better care of our community in this aspect, instead of saying, ‘Go to recovery, good luck,’” she said.

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