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Western Sierra Medical Clinic receives \$759k grant for substance abuse treatment

Western Sierra Medical Clinic has been awarded a federal grant to improve and expand substance abuse treatment services, especially for residents addicted to opioids such as prescription pain medications and heroin, a critical and fast-growing problem nationally and in the region.

According to a news release, a \$759,000 grant will allow Western Sierra, a nonprofit community health center, to collaborate with local agencies to develop a medication-assisted treatment program for opioid abuse in Nevada and Sierra counties. Western Sierra, the largest outpatient provider in the region, will add providers and other staff as part of the two-year grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

“The opioid epidemic is a major issue nationally and in the communities we serve, and the grant provides much-needed funding to establish the community’s first medication-assisted treatment program to serve residents,” said Western Sierra Medical Clinic CEO Scott McFarland. “We’re extremely excited about receiving the grant, which gives us the funding to build on the work we have been doing, hire more staff and expand the services needed to more effectively treat the problem in collaboration with community partners.”

McFarland added that Western Sierra is committed to combating substance abuse problems in the community, and is investing more than \$320,000 towards the new program.

The medication-assistance treatment program will especially help the underserved, including teenagers dealing with an addiction to heroin or prescription pain medications, such as Vicodin, OxyContin and Percocet.

Pain prescription medication abuse is a critical issue for Nevada County, which had the fifth-highest rate of non-fatal emergency room visits related to opioids in the state in 2013, according to the California Department of Public Health. The Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital emergency room handled 138 opioid-related cases in 2014, an 80 percent increase from the 27 in 2011.

Western Sierra has been working on treating substance abuse in the region for the past five years, including a clinic at Community Recovery Resources (CoRR), a recovery and wellness clinician in Grass Valley.

“It’s a growing problem in our community, and the federal funding will help with increasing both outreach and treatment services,” said Warren Daniels, CEO of Community Recovery

Resources. “Opiates and pain medication are so easy to get addicted to, and this program will save lives.”

Western Sierra will add clinicians, including a health education coordinator and teen liaison, as part of the grant.

The grant will also allow the nonprofit to integrate health care, behavioral health and substance abuse treatment, said Dr. Christina Lasich, who joins Western Sierra on April 1 and will serve as the Director of the Medication Assisted Treatment program. She is a University of California, Davis School of Medicine graduate who has been most recently the Medical Director for Community Recovery Resources. Lasich has been in private practice focusing on pain management in Grass Valley since 2001.

“The integrated, wellness-centered approach is proven far more effective than just focusing on one specific area,” Lasich said. “Quite often, those who abuse prescription pain medications are dealing with numerous health issues that go well beyond just the addiction.”

And the abuse of opioids has a far-reaching effect on the community, from crime to the demand on health care, especially at the Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital emergency room, said local health leaders.

“Early intervention and education efforts are the first steps in facing the issue,” said Michael Heggarty, Nevada County Health and Human Services Agency Director. “This grant provides the opportunity and the resources to develop a multipronged approach to combating the problem.”