

The LAPS Mental Health Design Team seek feedback, ideas and support from the Los Alamos Community Health Council

Members of the Los Alamos Public School's Mental Health Design Team gave a presentation on the Healthy School and Community Initiative at the Los Alamos Community Health Council meeting last Thursday, April 7th in the Los Alamos Municipal Building.

Mental Health Design Team members include the LAPS assistant superintendent Diane Delgado, Bernadette Lauritzen, and Bill Hargraves.

They opened with a brief explanation of their vision: *“Los Alamos Public Schools is a leader and partner in integrating community collaboration for assessing risks and fostering resilience for all students. We help ensure that students achieve emotional health and well-being.*

We collaborate with other disciplines, programs and agencies to integrate evidence-based services, develop policies, and provide behavioral health resources and strategies for student success.”

They defined “mental health” this way:

Mental Health is not just the absence of mental illness. It is a state of well-being where an individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with normal life stresses, can work and learn productively and is able to contribute to community.

Mental Health is about:

- *How we feel about ourselves and others*
- *Our ability to function and interact socially and emotionally*
- *How we are able to meet the demands of life*

“We want to ensure that students have optimal mental health”, said Hargraves, “You can’t do your best academically without it. We need to partner with families and with the community to achieve this.”

The members of the health council broke off into small groups to discuss and brainstorm actions that individuals and organizations can take to shift the culture, behaviors that might negatively impact mental health, gaps in our resources that need to be addressed, and possible roadblocks to the short-term and long-term goals.

These are some of the insights and suggestions that came from that meeting:

- A nurse who works in the emergency room said that kids come to the ER when they are suicidal as often as once or twice a week. Since there isn't a dedicated psychiatric unit in the hospital they have to be transferred to Las Cruces or El Paso where they will be far from their family and support network.
- Los Alamos Councilor, Andrea Cunningham said that the county was looking into having the Federal Center For Disease Control come to Los Alamos to make an assessment on the local factors that contribute to teen suicides. The CDC recently made a similar assessment of the Palo Alto, CA, community because they had a cluster of suicides.

- Someone expressed a concern about a trend in society where parents feel like they need to solve their kids' problems for them, and the kids don't have the skills to solve their own problems.
- Ellen Morris Bond, Executive Director of Self Help, Inc. said, "Every 17 and 18 year old I know is totally steeped in social media. We may not be able to reduce the amount of time that they spend, but we could look at social media as an opportunity."
- Ellen Ben-Naim suggested implementing a system where students could receive vouchers to see a therapist.
- One roadblock to solving the issue of reducing the stigma of getting mental health help is that many lab employees are concerned that receiving care would adversely affect their clearance.
- Another roadblock is that families tend to gloss over problems, and avoid publicly admitting to having any mental health issues. Doing that can be isolating, and makes other people who have that problem feel that they are alone.
- LAPS plans to hire a mental health coordinator who can help the schools and community move forward to solve this complex issue.

"We've done a lot of planning, and now we need to start acting," said Delgado. "This is affecting students at a younger age. We don't want to wait for there to be a crisis. We need to help people before that happens."

To stay informed about the Mental Health Design Team, visit the LAPS website at <http://laschools.net/>. At the right side there is a "Committees/Councils" pulldown menu where you will find the LAPS Mental Health Design Team (<http://laschools.net/domain/1161>).