

MENTAL HEALTH WEEKLY

Essential information for decision-makers

Mental health therapy program to allow teens school credit

An intensive outpatient therapy program in California for teens with significant anxiety or depression at risk of harming themselves recently received accreditation allowing its participants to receive high school credit.

The Newport-based After-School Program for Interventions and Resiliency Education (ASPIRE) Program offered by the Pickup Family Neurosciences Institute at Hoag, is now accredited by the Western Association

school district and school. This is the first program to locally receive accreditation for teen participation, officials stated.

The ASPIRE program, which first launched in Newport Beach on July 20, 2016, builds interpersonal relationships through educational groups, skill groups and weekly family meetings. The structured eight-week program is designed for teens ages 13 to 17 (see *MHW*, Aug. 1, 2016).

dialectical behavioral therapy, one of the few evidence-based therapies, besides cognitive behavioral therapy, he said.

In the year and one-half since the program commenced, it has been revamped, said Perna Rao, LMFT, clinical program manager of ASPIRE. The four modules are called: 1) interpersonal effectiveness, 2) distress tolerance, 3) mindfulness/walking the middle path, and 4) communication.

The skill-based program teaches its teen participants coping skills. "They are under so much pressure from society and social media," she said.

'These programs are vital to our community to help kids as efficiently as possible.'

Sina Safahieh, M.D.

Alarming trend

Officials say the program is in response to an alarming local trend of youths in Orange County afflicted with severe depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and other mental health disorders. Hoag launched the acclaimed ASPIRE program in 2018 in both Newport Beach and Irvine to help local youth and families tackle the life-changing challenges of these disorders.

The Orange district is eager to incorporate the curriculum into its health class, said Rao. Unfortunately,

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of Schools and Colleges for teens to receive high school credits, officials announced May 13.

The ASPIRE program, received a three-year accreditation, and teens who complete the program are eligible to receive up to five WASC-approved semester credit hours to be applied toward their high school graduation. Acceptance of credits toward graduation, as well as the number and type of credits granted, are determined by each individual

The program's participating students will receive five elected credits, which is the equivalent of a one-year elected course, said Sina Safahieh, M.D., program director of ASPIRE at Hoag. "That's a pretty big deal," Safahieh told *MHW*. The program is skill-based and structured for the teens, he said. Most medical or therapy-based programs do not offer this type of incentive to encourage student participation, he said.

The program incorporates the

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there had been a huge spike in teen suicide in the Orange district, she noted. Rao said she hopes the program can be a referral source for the school district.

Officials say that to date, more than 50 Orange County teens and their families have participated in the ASPIRE program and utilized its support, early intervention tools and access to specialists with prevention training that strengthens future functioning for the entire family. While the services provided are reimbursed by insurance, some families can't afford the associated deductible. Philanthropy supports family scholarships to ensure those who need ASPIRE can access it, they stated.

Program components

The program for teens is held on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday for three hours per day, 12

hours per week. At least one parent is required to participate in the program twice a week for one hour each time. "This lets the kids know that the families support them," said Safahieh. "The parents benefit from the program as much as the kids do."

Teens can acquire five credits each semester or it can be based on how the school wants to set up the program for teens to receive the credit.

The eight-week structured curriculum encourages students to discuss their feelings, said Safahieh. "It keeps them captivated," he said. "Nobody wants to be hospitalized," he said. The teens may benefit from skills-based training, he noted. The outcomes are positive in a program like this versus having to stay in inpatient hospitalization, Safahieh said.

The school year represents two semesters. Students can potentially graduate early or take a few needed

credits, said Safahieh. "The program helps kids' resilience," he said. "Our program is based on outcomes and making kids have a resource in our community," he said. "ASPIRE helps kids to get on their feet as fast as possible."

Safahieh added, "These programs are vital to our community to help kids as efficiently as possible."

Hoag currently collaborates with the Newport Mesa and Tustin school districts to offer the credit program and is expected to expand to additional local districts in the near future.

Added Rao, "The program is so imperative as a community-based hospital and organization." The psychosocial aspect of the program helps students who are struggling, she said, adding that the program is about continuity of care. The first alumni meeting was held May 8. Other alumni meetings will follow, she said. •