

Local Day Services Available to Adults with Mental Illness

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

An important part of treatment for anyone with a mental illness is some form of daily activity that lets the person participate in a social setting, learn new skills, and feel part of a community. A number of programs are available in Oakland and Berkeley to serve this need. At our May 28 meeting we heard from a panel of representatives from several of these programs: **Milly Alvarez**, Program Director, Towne House, Bay Area Community Services (BACS); **David Beckerman, PhD**, Clinical Intake Coordinator, La Cheim Adult Behavioral Health Services; **Linda Handy, MS**, Community Liaison Coordinator, La Cheim Adult Behavioral Health Services; **Nina Stradtner**, Employment Specialist, Berkeley Creative Living Center, Bonita House, Inc.; **Pansy Taft-Butkowski, RN, MA**, Administrator, Sausal Creek Outpatient Stabilization Clinic.

La Cheim Adult Behavioral Health Services

“Partial hospitalization as a treatment option,” said David Beckerman, “is part of a continuum of care ranging from outpatient to inpatient services. The goal of partial hospitalization is to shorten a client’s length of stay as an inpatient. Or, if the person is in the community and losing stability, to provide additional support.”



DAVID BECKERMAN, PHD



LINDA HANDY, MS

Many of La Cheim’s clients are referred to the community liaison coordinator, Linda Handy, while they are still in the hospital, where she meets with and assesses them, then makes a referral to Beckerman. “We try to move as rapidly as possible to avoid a lapse in treatment,” Handy said. La Cheim can even pick the client up upon discharge. “We especially try to avoid having a client discharged from inpatient services on a Thursday, spend all day Friday and the weekend with nothing to do, then come to La Cheim on Monday when the person may already be starting to decompensate.”

However, not all clients start as inpatient referrals. They may also be referred to La Cheim by case managers, psychiatrists, family members, and by themselves. La Cheim requires the client to commit to three things: to daily attendance in the program; to recovery, if he or she has dual diagnosis (i.e., mental illness and substance abuse); and to a treatment plan with short- and long-term goals.

“We take a harm reduction approach to substance abuse recovery,” Beckerman said. “If the person slips, then we don’t immediately put him or her out of the program but ask the person to identify the triggers that led to the use and then work with them toward recovery.” The program also requires chemical testing for dual-diagnosis clients.

The La Cheim program is five days a week, 9:30 to 3:00. “We start with a process group,” Beckerman said, “which asks how are you doing and what do you want to accomplish today. Then the clients go into treatment groups such as symptom management, cognitive therapy, grief management, and so on.” The groups are kept small, eight to nine people, and usually find an emphasis that’s congenial to the members.

“The goal is to get the person’s independence back,” Handy said. “For example, we want to get them using public transit and finding housing. We want them always focusing on getting to the next step. Discharge planning is a key goal.”

Length of stay in the program depends on the client. Some stay only four weeks, while others with more to work on might remain two to three months. The majority of clients are in Medicare or Medi-Cal/Medicare (i.e., federally funded), although La Cheim also works with some private insurers.

La Cheim has a clinic in Berkeley (510-486-8744), near University Avenue at the north end of Aquatic Park, which is wheelchair accessible, and another in Oakland (510-596-8125) on Claremont Avenue near BART. The program provides a van for clients at the Berkeley Clinic.

Sausal Creek Outpatient Stabilization Clinic

“Our facility is a little different from a day program,” said Pansy Taft-Butkowski. “We operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and cater to clients in distress from mental illness.” Sausal Creek is the only facility of its type in Alameda County and has been in operation since September 2002. Since then, they have served more than 1,000 clients.

Three years ago, Taft-Butkowski explained, the county’s deputy director of mental health services attended a statewide meeting and learned that Alameda County had the highest number of 5150s



*PANSY TAFT-BUTKOWSKI, RN,
MA*

(the section of the California Welfare and Institutions Code identifying a person as a danger to self or others) in the state. The county then formed the Front Door Committee to explore solutions to this problem and decided that crisis services offered on a 24/7 basis were the answer. Funding for the program came from the Telecare Corporation's subcontracted services that were formerly provided at North County Jail, which Taft-Butkowski had administered.

"We're happy to be in the community providing this service," she said. "Of a recorded 944 clients as of last month, we've only had four 5150s. And even though our treatment is voluntary—in fact, the client has to sign a permission form to be treated—no one has ever walked away on a 5150."

Sausal Creek's target population is mentally ill people who are experiencing distress. For example, they may be running out of medications and don't want to decompensate. Some are in acute psychosis or suicidal. "In the past six weeks," she said, "we've also seen more people come in because they can't get a psychiatric appointment within the next 60 to 90 days because of clinics closing due to the budget cuts. They need immediate help and they need medication."

The program has a psychiatrist available 12 hours a day, with nurses and crisis intervention specialists available 24 hours. While Sausal Creek has no on-site pharmacy, they have some medications available on an emergency basis and can fax prescriptions to a county-contracted pharmacy close to the client's residence. The facility has the capacity to treat 20 to 25 patients a day, providing meals and a shower. They can even make up beds for up to three people if someone arrives late at night and other treatment facilities are closed. The average length of stay is about 5 hours; the program by its own directives cannot keep anyone longer than 24 hours.

Sausal Creek also cannot take anyone who is under 18 years old, is threatening assault, is showing acute medical symptoms (i.e., sick or injured and requires a doctor's attention), or has a primary diagnosis of Alzheimer's or dementia.

The Sausal Creek facility (510-437-2363) is located at 2620 26th Avenue in Oakland and can provide transportation if necessary.

Berkeley Creative Living Center

"We are one of four programs run by Bonita House, Inc.," said Nina Stradtner. "Our services are completely free—there is no billing—and we run on a drop-in basis." The center is open Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 to 3:00 and Tuesdays for an art program from 9:00 to 12:00. Its services are available to people suffering from severe mental illness that may include drug and alcohol abuse. Although technically the center is supposed to take only Berkeley residents, it has never turned anyone away.



NINA STRADTNER

A typical day starts with a stretch and meditation session, then moves into groups that include self-esteem, search for meaning, symptom management, art therapy, and wellness. The center also refers people to employment and volunteer opportunities. They have 6 counselors on staff—all interning while they work on their degrees in psychology and counseling.

“We provide a well-balance, nutritional lunch for two dollars,” Stradtner said, “which provides a chance for counselors and staff to interact with the members.”

The Creative Living Center has been in operation for 32 years, and a number of its member clients have been with the program for almost that long. The membership is half men, half women, with an average age of about 45. On a typical day the center will serve 60 to 70 clients.

Located in the First Congregational Church at Durant and Dana streets in Berkeley, the center (510-548-2269) offers its programs in a main room, an art room, and three smaller rooms for group sessions.

Towne House, Bay Area Community Services

“I have a great respect for the support and advocacy that family members supply for the mentally ill,” said Milly Alvarez, who has been program director at Towne House for 23 years. This year, Bay Area Community Services celebrates 50 years of service.

The Towne House program started in 1969, after the closing of many mental hospitals, when state social workers in Oakland realized that people in the community needed a place to go each day.

The Towne family had just donated their large house to a local church, and it was acquired for day programs.

“We are based on the clubhouse model that originated with New York City’s Fountain House,” Alvarez said. “The program is founded on membership and provides a place for a person to belong and to do meaningful activities. These are not made-up work but real tasks needed to keep the organization going.” The only criterion for membership is a diagnosis of major mental illness. The atmosphere is friendly, supportive, and inclusive.

Towne House activities are divided into three areas:

- The Kitchen, which has commercial-grade appliances, where members learn to cook and to work together by preparing meals for the members. They offer a light breakfast, snacks, and lunch.



MILLY ALVAREZ

- House and Grounds keeps up the facility with light maintenance, janitorial services, and gardening. Towne House has no outside contractors but does have an association with the Merrick College Horticultural Department, where members can attend classes and learn about landscaping.
- Clerical is for members with interests in creative efforts and offers reception services, access to computers and the internet, a newsletter, and art projects. (Alvarez brought along a story board created by the members of this group to commemorate BACS's 50th anniversary.)

"Members are involved in every step of decision making for the clubhouse," Alvarez said. Each group has the support of a senior mental health worker and teacher. There is room in the program for 60 people, allowing for 20 positions in each activity area.

Towne House also has an employment service which is accredited with the Department of Rehabilitation to help members find jobs and attain the level of independence that they want. In addition, the day's program includes group sessions in symptom management, dual diagnosis, exercise and weight management, arts and crafts, writing, and internet emailing. However, there is no medical staff or psychiatrist on duty.

The program was originally one day a week but now runs Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 2:30. Towne House takes referrals from family members, psychiatrists, and hospitals. The facility (510-658-9480) is located on Oakland Avenue just off Highway 580.

"If people have structure to their days, meaningful activity, and a place to belong," Alvarez said, "then they are less likely to relapse. And if they do, they are likely to come back more quickly."