

New therapy program aims to help at-risk youth in Comal County

• By Theresa Davis The Herald-Zeitung

A new therapy team will soon begin work across Comal, Hays and Uvalde counties to help at-risk youth.

Program funding comes from the Texas state legislature's mental health response to the 2022 Uvalde school shooting.

The Multisystemic Therapy (MST) team's three therapists — one in each county — will work with about 40 to 50 at-risk youth and families every year.

The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute has helped expand MST services in Texas.

Andy Keller, president and CEO of the Meadows Institute, said the therapy model is an intense intervention that aims to break cycles of negative behaviors.

"These young people may have trauma, anger, depression, anxiety, and they make a series of bad decisions that hurt themselves and hurt other people," Keller said. "You can't just deal with that with individual psychotherapy or funding. You need to help the adults in that child's world."

MST therapists are available 24/7 and work with youth and families in their homes for at least three to five months.

Community leaders gathered at the McKenna Center in New Braunfels on Wednesday to learn more about the new program.

Attendees included local law enforcement, probation officers, mental health providers and organizations that work with at-risk youth in schools.

Many of those representatives can refer youth and families for the MST program.

The program serves children ages 12-17 who exhibit criminal or violent behaviors, have substance abuse issues, or have chronic behavior issues.

These youth are often at risk of expulsion, being removed from their homes, or more severe criminal consequences such as probation violations and incarceration.

The Hill Country Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities (MHDD) Center is leading the charge on the local three-county team.

MST programs are part of Texas' statewide efforts to prevent violence in communities and schools.

The Uvalde, Comal and Hays counties team is one of seven funded by the Texas legislature last year.

Texas lawmakers recently approved about \$32 million to add 15 more MST teams this year.

Melissa Ramirez, director of children's services with Hill Country MHDD, said that early intervention is critical for preventing violence.

"We want to build that support into the community, and have those long-term positive outcomes for kids and families," Ramirez said. "It's really based on their individual needs."

MST therapists work to identify the factors driving a child's behaviors.

For example, a young person abusing or selling drugs may have access to the substances through family or friends.

They may turn to drugs or violence because of boredom, depression, or family conflict.

“The MST therapist is engaged with the youth and invests lots of time to get to know them and the people in their life,” Keller said. “Trials show that in the vast majority of cases, things can improve. These youth can stay at home, stay in school, and we can reduce repeat incidences of violence.”

A 14-year research study of MST participants showed that juvenile offenders had 54% fewer re-arrests compared to non-participants.

Therapists also focus on the family’s strengths and building a support system that will help them address problems after the program has ended.