

Mental health offices expand into CHA towers

By Jodie Jackson Jr.

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Residents at two Columbia Housing Authority high-rise apartment complexes will have access to on-site mental health services as a result of a new partnership with Burrell Behavioral Health.

Burrell will now have offices at Paquin Tower, 1201 Paquin St., and Oak Towers, 700 N. Garth Ave. Phil Steinhaus, CHA's chief executive officer, said a number of residents at both locations already are receiving mental health services from Burrell. CHA and Burrell share the goal of helping residents live as independently as possible, he said.

Paquin and Oak Towers provide affordable housing to seniors and people with disabilities. The partnership is called the Housing, Outreach, Mental Health Wellness, Empowerment Partnership Project, or HOME. Services begin Monday and are free of charge. Every resident in the buildings will have access to services ranging from wellness programs and crisis intervention to financial counseling and substance abuse programs.

The program also will offer transportation to Burrell's office at 1805 E. Walnut St.

"We have a shared population, and we need to reach them where they're at," said Craig Valone, director of adult services at Burrell, a not-for-profit organization with service areas in Mid-Missouri and the Springfield area.

Steinhaus said the residents at the two complexes are sometimes susceptible to mental health issues, whether it's depression or a more severe mental illness previously diagnosed. But the program is not only for people in crisis. It will help residents manage medications, provide therapy "or just be there for a friendly chat when needed," Steinhaus said.

Valone introduced the program to Paquin residents today as a way to build a sense of community through programs that will target healthy cooking, coping skills and other skill-building goals.

"Our hope is that by engaging in some of these programs, they won't be in crisis," he said.

Paquin has 200 apartments; Oak Towers has 147. Steinhaus pointed out that not everyone in the high-rises has mental health issues.

"We're not a mental hospital," he said, "but we do know that for many years, the mental health system has been defunded." Many people who lost or need mental health services to maintain independent lifestyles simply need housing, and that's where the housing authority comes in, Steinhaus said.

"If we can help them become stable and live independently, we'll do so in partnership with other agencies in town," he said.

Eugenia Gill has lived at Paquin for 18 months and said she looks forward to the HOME program.

"People get stuck in mental illness and depression and don't realize it's treatable," Gill said. The HOME program will help residents identify their needs and give them skills to help themselves, she said.

"That's basically what it's about — helping people be independent," Gill said.

The program is funded through Burrell's funding sources and the Missouri Department of Mental Health.