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**01/13/06**

### **South County mental health issues discussed**

NORTH PORT--Members of North Port CHAT, the Community Health Action Team, who met Wednesday, spent a large portion of their meeting discussing mental health issues.

Mike Theall, the Sarasota Mental Health Services policy coordinator, told CHAT about a report the county is writing to document which mental health services are being utilized most in the county.

"We want to know how to provide the best services," he said. "We're using the report as an agent for change in the county, and to see where the money should go."

Information for the report will be gathered via survey. One survey is for those who work in the mental health field, while another is for "civilians," or nonmedical personnel, who actually use the survey. Copies of the survey will be available in doctors' offices in Englewood, Venice and in Senior Friendship Center locations. The county's goal is to have between 500 and 1,000 surveys completed by the end of the month.

"We want to have demographic information so we can generate community-specific data," Theall said.

During member Marcia Swineheart's update on the North Port Health and Family Service Center, she admitted that one of the greatest challenges involves mental health.

"We have a problem with referring those who come to us that have no insurance," she said. "They fall between the cracks and it's a big problem."

The Center is working to combat this problem by having a psychiatrist come

in every six weeks. He is already seeing patients, although he doesn't work with children. Theall stated that the county is in the process of hiring a provider to work with children who will raise the current level of mental health services in the area. In the meantime, the doctor who staffs the clinic has some experience in the field.

"Dr. Brown is considered to be one of the best in terms of handling psychotropic drugs, especially with kids," said Theall.

In other business, Officer J.W. Triplett, who chairs the CHAT Substance Abuse Sub-committee, told the rest of the group about an under-utilized resource called the "Be Brave Hotline."

"It's run by the (Sarasota County) Sheriff's Department, and anyone concerned about local drug dealing can call and leave an anonymous tip and local law enforcement will take care of it," Triplett said. "The number is 1-877-723-2728."

Triplett also announced the creation of a new police bicycle patrol unit.

"(Developer) Peter E. Shipps donated over \$7,000 for bikes, uniforms and other equipment," Triplett said. "It will be a juvenile task force for when kids are out of school. The bikes will help officers get to places where kids are hanging out."


All officers involved in the program will be required to attend bicycle patrol school, and must ride 34 miles in order to pass the class.

North Port CHAT is one of three citizen groups that are part of the Community Health Improvement Project, or CHIP. CHIP is a community-based initiative that began in 2002 with the goal of improving the health of Sarasota and Charlotte County residents. The CHAT group meets monthly at the Peace River North Port Health Park. Their next meeting is at 4:30 p.m. on Feb. 8. For more information, contact Jessica Balos or Kari Ellingstad at 861-2987, or visit their Web site at [www.npchat.blogspot.com](http://www.npchat.blogspot.com).

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Staff Writer

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