

Living Well

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Report shines spotlight on Tri-Valley's top health care needs

Behavioral health, access to care, structural racism among focus areas cited in John Muir assessment

By CIERRA BAILEY

As impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic linger, maintaining good health remains at the top of mind for many, including physical, mental, emotional and even financial.

The demand for adequate, accessible health care in the Tri-Valley is only growing and local health care providers like John Muir Health have recently shared ways in which they are addressing the community's needs.

John Muir's 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) zooms in on the top priority health needs of the Tri-Valley and their subsequent implementation strategy identifies plans to tackle them.

The 212-page CHNA — initially released in December — was a collaborative effort among several local and regional health care providers, including John Muir and Stanford Health Care Tri-Valley as well as Sutter Health, St. Rose Hospital and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals. Kaiser Permanente, the Alameda County Public Health Department and Contra Costa Health Services were also partners involved.

Behavioral health, structural racism, economic security, housing and homelessness, health care access and delivery, community and family safety, food security and transportation were identified as the Tri-Valley's top eight priority health needs.

Behavioral health was No. 1 on the list across the board for all of John Muir's service areas, including the Tri-Valley along with eastern Contra Costa County, central Contra



An exterior view of John Muir Health's Walnut Creek Medical Center. They have another hospital location in Concord and are in the process of acquiring San Ramon Regional Medical Center. COURTESY JMH

Costa County, western Contra Costa County and northern Alameda County.

The report is conducted every three years as required by the state for nonprofit hospitals. As part of the requirement, the CHNA must include input from experts in public health, local health departments and the community, including representatives of minority, low-income, medically underserved and other high-need populations.

According to Jamie Elmasu, director of community health improvement for John Muir, once priority areas are identified — through a process that involves collecting and analyzing various sets of health data and engaging community focus groups — each health care system brings the information back to their respective internal stakeholders to figure out a strategy to address those needs over the next three years.

John Muir Health has developed a 2023-2025 Community Health Implementation Strategy that thoroughly outlines their approach to tackling the needs of the communities they serve.

With behavioral health being the top need throughout the region, Elmasu said that was an obvious key focus area for the health system. According to the CHNA, behavioral health refers to mental health, emotional and psychological well-being, along with the ability to cope with normal, daily

life. Behavioral health also covers substance abuse, which affects many other aspects of a person's overall health.

While none of the region's top health needs are new issues, Elmasu reiterated that they were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and are affecting a broader range of people than typically seen during pre-pandemic years.

Citing behavioral health as an example, Elmasu said, "We're seeing it across the board, so not only uninsured and low-income folks that we typically serve; it's now insured people and even youth. We know issues with our young people — and specifically our teens — have become so severe and figuring out how can we better serve our young community through our community benefit opportunities is critical."

The health system's other focus areas for this cycle include health care access and housing and homelessness, which are also issues that had a new light shed on them as a result of COVID-19, particularly as it relates to accessing vaccines.

John Muir's mobile clinic is one of their offerings that played a significant role in bringing the vaccines to the community. "Our Mobile Health Clinic and our nurses were actually one of the first to become trained in vaccine administration and in COVID testing," Elmasu said, adding that they are proud

of their ability to serve the community during such a critical time.

In addition to structural racism overall being recognized as a significant health need in the report, the CHNA identified racial disparities within the other categories, with African American and Latino communities being impacted by several of the various health needs at a higher rate than other demographics. As a result of these findings, John Muir is also taking a closer look at how to improve the issue.

Part of their implementation strategy involves investing additional funding dollars to all of their nonprofit partners to provide workshops and education sessions and those organizations are tasked with creating an intervention to address structural racism internally like employment practices, human resources policies, board of director involvement and other aspects of the organization.

"It's very innovative and it's very new as it relates to how our community health team is partnering with our nonprofits," Elmasu said.

Accomplishing the goals to improve upon the community's needs is a process that takes time and does not come without its challenges. While their strategy aims to make an impact, there is no quick fix to the health



COURTESY JMH

Tammie Iseri, pharmacy manager at JMH, prepares a COVID-19 vaccine at the Mobile Health Clinic.

HEALTH CARE

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issues affecting the Tri-Valley and beyond.

“The single most pressing barrier, in my experience, is the fact that we’re trying to solve societal problems at large,” Elmasu said. “We’re only a few people. We have limited budget, so we have our limitations internally and of course we’re limited in terms of which nonprofit partners that exist in the area.”

She continued, “When we look at Contra Costa County versus Alameda County, Alameda County has a more robust nonprofit network providing services to the community, but Contra Costa County is growing so our nonprofit organizations, many of them that started in central county in Concord now have secondary or satellite offices out in Antioch or east county.”

Elmasu said that while there isn’t a magic amount of dollars that’s going to resolve the issues

overnight, she feels strongly that through their efforts and those of other health care systems in the area, they can impact a number of people and families to significantly change their health trajectory.

One of their newest partners as of this year is Livermore-based Goodness Village. John Muir is providing the nonprofit tiny home community with funding to support a full-time case manager for the next three years as the organization also plans to expand with additional housing units.

Elmasu also highlighted that once John Muir fully acquires San Ramon Regional Medical Center, they will be able to better serve the Tri-Valley region at large.

“We’re already doing some things, but we’re not doing a tremendous amount in the Tri-Valley — the reason being is that our hospitals currently are located in Concord and Walnut Creek and so our primary focus area is going to be around those hospitals. But we do have an outpatient center in Pleasanton and now of course if we’re expanding to purchase another hospital, I think what does that mean to make those services more robust is the question,” she said.

John Muir’s CHNA and Implementation Strategy are available to the public on their website. ■



COURTESY:JMH

School nurse Adrienne Christensen conducts a hearing screening at Cambridge Elementary School in Concord.



COURTESY:JMH

In addition to its main hospital in Walnut Creek, John Muir Health operates the Concord Medical Center (above). Its Mobile Health Clinic (below) is another way the health system aims to address the need for access to care throughout their service areas.



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Dublin students launch support app for teenage substance abuse

My Alcohol Story aims to connect struggling youth, create sense of community

By NICOLE GONZALES

An online platform created by two Dublin teens is making strides in alcohol and drug abuse support for underage users. The website and app, My Alcohol Story, allows viewers to anonymously read, share and interact with posts about their struggles with substances.

Founded by Dublin High School students Anit Annadi and Cyril Joby, My Alcohol Story aims to bridge the gap in awareness and treatment for teenage alcohol abuse. Other support groups or systems aimed toward alcoholism or drugs largely exist for adults, neglecting underage users, the pair said.

"Firstly, we understood there was a huge gap in this type of support," said Annadi, who serves as the company's CEO. "Most treatments or groups are targeted toward adults and don't address the needs of teenagers who are also struggling to find a support community."

"It's a very serious issue that most people don't think about. Things like Alcoholics Anonymous exist, but there is no well-known or accepted platform for teenage alcoholism despite it being a large problem that is often overlooked," Annadi added.

What is unique about My Alcohol Story is that users are able to share their stories without using their own names. Annadi has said this aspect of the app provides teenagers with a safe place to discuss their experiences without fear of judgment or retaliation.

"The anonymity aspect is huge for our platform. When sharing their own personal stories, teens and young adults might be apprehensive to attach their name to that with the legal aspect," he said.

Annadi and Joby, currently juniors at Dublin High, coded the website and application themselves. Initially the co-founders spent large amounts of their time learning, navigating



COURTESY ANIT ANNADI

My Alcohol Story co-founder Anit Annadi (right) sits next to Sathvik Lakamsani, a coder for the app and website.

and trying out different codes and digital programming.

"We brainstormed and started to think about what it would take to build something like this," Annadi said.

Since its launch in June 2022, the app has attracted over 200 users and published dozens of stories.

They have partnered with non-profits across the nation, such as

Global Mental Health Outreach and MED-ucate by SPARK, to increase their notoriety and support skills.

The founders hope the app can untimely connect those who have struggled with addiction with similar stories and help them find a sense of community.

"We wanted people to be able to feel supported, like they're not alone with those issues," Annadi

said. "We encourage teenagers and young adults to join the platform even if you're just curious about the app or topic."

Annadi hopes My Alcohol Story will be able to continue expanding and reach broader audiences. They plan on adding more features to improve the platform in the future.

To visit the live site, go to myalcoholstory.com/. ■



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Maintaining financial health now and into the future

Plan spending and saving strategies to weather any storm

The past few years have upended many perceptions of financial stability. A layoff or career change, inflation never before seen by younger generations and the lingering uncertainty of the pandemic might have thrown off financial planning for many.

Now is a great time to review strategies for smart spending and saving to better weather whatever the future has in store.

Financial planning professionals suggest that individuals start by creating a budget. Online trackers such as Mint.com can help understand spending.

Here are tips for saving and spending in 2023:

Use credit responsibly: Pay off

credit cards each month, if possible, to avoid accumulating debt and build good credit.

Set up automatic savings: You can do this through your bank and via an employer's payroll. Use the new year to take a fresh look at the savings options through the employer, including a Health Savings Account (HSA), which can be carried over from one year to the next.

Invest windfalls: Invest any unexpected cash, such as bonuses or tax refunds, and make the money work harder.

Review your retirement plans: The new year may bring changes such as buying a home, updating a will or navigating a higher tax bracket. A professional can provide a new

year review to keep retirement plans on track no matter where someone is in their working life.

Plan your tax payments: Consider paying estimated taxes throughout the year to avoid a large tax bill in April. Estimated tax payments can be especially helpful for contract workers or freelancers who don't have taxes taken out of their pay automatically.

Shop smarter: Combat inflation by switching to store brands for some items. Check whether generic medications will work for you and compare prices for different pharmacies.

Nobody can predict the future, but prudent planning can help prepare for whatever the future holds. ■

— NewsUSA



GETTY IMAGES

Having a strategy for smart spending and saving is a prudent way to plan for the future, whatever it may hold.

Hike for Hope coming later this spring

Annual recreation event serves as key fundraiser for Hope Hospice

By JEANITA LYMAN

Supporters of Hope Hospice are set to return to the trails at Del Valle Regional Park this May for the 2023 Hike for Hope fundraising event that the nonprofit first kicked off more than a decade ago.

Registration is currently open for this year's Hike for Hope, with organizers encouraging attendees to register by March 31 to guarantee an event t-shirt. They are also seeking to connect with potential vendors by March 31. The hike is set for May 6 starting at 8:30 a.m. with easy or moderate options, followed by a free barbecue for hikers that afternoon.

"The East Shore Trail is a mostly flat out-and-back option that's a total 2.6 miles, or shorter if one turns around sooner," said Kendra Strey, communications director for Hope Hospice. "More advanced hikers can tack on a scenic loop via the Hetch Hetchy and Ridgeline trails for a payoff view after a 500-foot incline, for a total 4.4 miles."

This year's hike at the regional park in Livermore comes on the heels of a record-breaking event last year, which saw 1,300 registrants and \$180,000 in funds raised for Hope Hospice programs and services, according to Strey.

"The event has definitely evolved over the years, and we try to build upon what's working and look for areas where we can improve the experience," Strey said. "Last year, we were surprised by the high attendance. It was a good problem to have, but we saw some ways to make things go more smoothly for the attendees."

Some adjustments include changes to the site layout during the afternoon barbecue, and adding lawn games, which proved to be popular at last year's event, Strey said.

Encouraging early registration and pickup for event t-shirts ahead of the hike was also a crucial step amid last year's high attendance that is returning this year.

"This reduces the line on the morning of the event for people who need to retrieve their shirts," Strey said. "Registration remains open through event day (including on-site signups), but we only order a limited quantity of t-shirts after that March 31 cutoff, and they're available on a first come, first served basis."

With organizers anticipating high attendance again this year, Strey said that there were a number of factors that could be contributing to the hike's popularity.

"People participate for different reasons," Strey said. "For some, it's a memorial event where family members reunite and hike in remembrance of a loved one who has passed. A majority of participants return annually because they support our mission and find the event to be an enjoyable way to give back to their community."

Funds raised from the hike are crucial for maintaining a range of services at Hope Hospice, Strey said, in particular by enabling the end-of-life support organization to continue offering grief support and family caregiver programs to the community free of charge.

"That's a cause that a lot of people can get behind — it's money raised by this community, for this community," Strey said.

"We find that a lot of client families are surprised at the abundance and quality of supportive programming that complements our hospice service," she added. "It's not something you find with many other providers. We're able to offer these because of support from donations



CHUCK DECKERT

Hike for Hope is a popular fundraising event for Hope Hospice. The 2023 installment is set to arrive at Del Valle Regional Park on May 6.

and fundraisers like H4H."

In addition to relying on fundraising support and donations as a nonprofit organization, Strey noted that volunteer workers are critical for the cause, particularly for organizing large events such as the upcoming hike.

"We couldn't do this event without our wonderful volunteers," Strey said. "A majority of them are our regular hospice volunteers who sign on to help with extra projects like this. But some people hear about the need and sign on just for the single event. About 60 people make the

event work, from the setup crew and t-shirt organizers to the trail safety team and those who help us acquire donations for our silent auction."

Registration and more information for prospective hikers, volunteers and vendors is available at thehikeforhope.com. ■

