

Respite care

County asked to help caretakers of mentally ill

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

County commissioners will soon be asked to put up \$500,000 for a kinder and gentler Oakland County. The money will be used to provide respite care for people suffering from paranoia, panic disorders, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses, according to Richard M. Cooper, interim director of Oakland County Community Mental Health.

Cooper Friday said the request for local funds would likely be made in two months or so, prior to a similar request — for an undisclosed amount of money — to state officials.

The need for respite care was dramatically illustrated Thursday at the regular meeting of the County Board of Commissioners.

Nine people — associated with the Oakland chapter of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill — each talked about their experiences pointing up the need for respite care. Among them were:

• Carol Vainer of Bloomfield Hills, whose daughter was a college honor student until she sustained head injuries in an auto accident.

Vainer was forced to quit her job as a teacher and take turns with her husband, a company executive, providing around-the-clock care for their daughter, Vainer said.

"We're Republicans," Vainer said. "And we try to care for our own. But we need help."

• Joan Rolick of Farmington Hills said caring for her 35-year-old son, who recently attempted suicide, is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week job.

She and her family do not mind providing that care, Rolick said, even though it has extracted a heavy toll and, at times, threatened to "destroy my family."

Rolick said respite care would provide temporary relief "from the endless bootstrapping stress" that comes with loving and caring for someone with mental illness.

Walter Lang of Rochester Hills said his 33-year-old son, Robert, had a responsible job with a West Coast company and seemed to be in total control of his life until "things just started to go wrong."

Lang said his son, who played basketball at Troy High School before graduating and going to college where he earned a mechanical engineering degree, was subsequently diagnosed as having schizophrenia, one of many forms of mental illness.

He and his wife, Marie, provide almost constant care for Robert, fearing that he would otherwise become one of the homeless or do harm to himself, Lang said.

"We do it because we love him. But respite care would give us a break," said Lang, who is retired.

RESPIRE CARE is the term applied to relief given to the people, usually relatives, who tend those stricken with mental illness or, in some cases, advanced Alzheimer's disease.

It can be provided by sending trained personnel into the home — allowing caregivers to go elsewhere — or at a center or day care facility.

Oakland County, with state assistance, has about \$80,000 — including \$35,000 allocated by commissioners in January — to provide respite care to about 700 people classified as mentally retarded.

Thanks mainly to the \$338,000 supplement, Oakland does not currently have a waiting list of mentally retarded individuals needing respite care, Cooper said.

It's a different story, however, for the mentally ill.

The county has no funds — state

or local — to provide respite care for their families, Cooper said.

The difference between mentally retarded and mentally ill is often hard to explain, he said. Both groups have serious disorders that wreak havoc on the individual and families. Many of the mentally retarded are born that way, Cooper said. "They have sub average intelligence and no realistic chance of improvement."

MENTAL ILLNESS is harder to identify. Partly because the mentally ill are often intelligent and can function well for part of their lives.

"But mental illness can hit you, me or anybody," Cooper emphasized, "with no warning or explanation."

Calvin Lippitt of Southfield, a board member of the Alliance, said mental illness is frequently characterized by mood swings — at least it was for his son who was an honor student at Michigan State University before being hit by mental illness.

"At times — particularly if they're on medication — they can appear normal and function," Lippitt said. "You'd never know they are sick."

"At other times, they hear voices, talk gibberish, they're off the wall."

When mental illness hits, however, it is devastating. Families — like those whose experiences were outlined Thursday — feel helpless, even with the best care and counseling.

Even the strongest families can fall apart, because of the endless demands placed upon its members.

When families are no longer capable of caring for their mentally ill loved one, he or she is often hospitalized, placing an even greater financial burden on the family or state.

Thus, respite care is a good investment, according to those close to the problem, because it reduces the demand for more expensive alternatives.

ESTIMATES OF the number of mentally ill people in Oakland County range from 8,000 to 11,000, Lippitt says.

Historically, neither they nor their families have been organized, Lippitt said. They have not lobbied for help — like respite care — that would ease their burden.

That's changing, however. In cooperation with the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, county health officials are preparing to approach the county — and then the state — for money for respite care.

Cooper said the Alliance for the Mentally Ill has conducted a survey to enable officials to assess the problem and seek assistance.

Oakland commissioners have already said they will provide a sympathetic ear — and, most likely, county money — when advocates for respite care for the mentally ill make their pitch.

In January — when Oakland allocated \$338,000 for respite care for the mentally retarded — two key commissioners predicted as much.

Commissioners Roy Rewold, R-Oakland Township, and Nancy McConnell, R-Bloomfield Hills, said money for such respite care would likely be provided once advocates have a concrete plan and proposal.

It might be a different story at the state level, however, according to State Rep. David M. Gubow, D-Huntington Woods, who is chairman of the House Committee on Mental Health.

The mentally ill in Oakland indeed may need respite care, Gubow said in a phone interview Friday. "But so does every other county in Michigan."

He and his colleagues will listen to and give careful consideration to any county proposal, Gubow said.

Oakland OK's vote on solid waste plan

Oakland County commissioners have flip-flopped on the idea of a countywide vote on the proposed solid waste plan.

At Thursday's regular meeting of the county board, they approved and sent to committee a measure to put the question of bonding the proposed \$500-million program to a vote of the people — possibly in August, when many communities are holding primary elections.

Details will likely be worked out as the measure goes to committee this week.

Thursday's board action was a reversal of a decision made in July, when commissioners feared any such vote would be viewed as a referendum on the proposed waste-to-energy incinerator planned for Auburn Hills — and defeated.

Commissioners now want such a referendum.

The resolution approved last week specifically asks voters to approve the county's selling bonds to finance solid waste management.

"If voters approve the bond issue, we can go forward," said board Chairman Roy Rewold, R-Oakland Township. "If they reject it, we'll have to consider other options."

Commissioner Donn L. Wolf, R-Farmington Hills, said he is pleased that voters will be consulted.

"But we've got a big education job ahead of us," he said, referring to the information commissioners acknowledge they must put forth if voters are to have adequate information on which to base their decision.

Temple hosts author Chafets

Ze'Ev Chafets, author of "Devil's Night: And Other True Tales of Detroit," will speak at the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills at 8:30 p.m. Monday, April 29. His subject: "Detroit: A City At War."

The public is invited and admission is \$5. His presentation will be followed by a question-and-answer session.

Chafets' book created a controversy when it was published last fall. His story of the fires and vandalism that had become a Devil's Night tradition in Detroit angered city officials, including Mayor Coleman Young.

But Chafets has said that he sees the activities of Devil's Night as a

symbol of urban, moral and economic decay so typical of American cities today.

He was interviewed widely about the book and excerpts were carried in the Sunday Magazine of the New York Times.

Chafets, born in Pontiac, now lives in Tel Aviv. He moved to Israel in 1967, and became politically active, serving as a spokesman for the Begin government during the early years of that administration.

The Birmingham Temple is located at 28611 W. 12 Mile Road between Inkster and Middlebelt. For more information, call the temple office at 477-1410.

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