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## **Mental health awareness for low-income families in Santa Cruz County**

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### **Author Note**

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## **Abstract**

Mental health is an ongoing issue that affects millions of individuals each year. Mariposa Wellness Center is an agency within Community Connections that provides various services and support for individuals seeking treatment. Mariposa Wellness Center is a program located in the city of Watsonville. Mariposa Wellness Center aids struggling adults who suffer from mental health issues, addressing increased needs in Santa Cruz County due to the pandemic, stigma, and limited healthcare access. A mental health condition involves changing moods, behaviors, and emotions. Mental health illness requires treatment, and without treatment, it can lead to major and significant consequences such as having a dysfunctional family, homelessness, alcohol, and substance abuse. The outreach will be performed at a community event, such as the local farmers' market. The outcome of this outreach will be to raise awareness, educate, and receive more incoming referrals, which will allow Mariposa Wellness Center to provide adequate treatment.

*Keywords: Mental Health, Low-Income, Rural communities, Substance Use Disorder (SUD), Healthcare, (AMI) Any Mental Illness, Childhood Trauma.*

## **Mariposa Wellness Center , Santa Cruz County**

Mariposas Mission is to empower our mental health community through wellness meaningful activity and community connection. We believe that each person who walks through our doors has a gift. Our job is to help individuals discover those gifts and reach their full potential.

Mariposa Wellness Center is a program located in the city of Watsonville. The Mariposa Wellness Center program helps adults struggling with mental health disorders and other psychiatric challenges. Here at Mariposa, our goal is to help them receive adequate treatment.

The population that Mariposa Wellness Center serves is Medicaid low-income individuals, and most of the participants are Caucasians and 3% Hispanics. Low income, bilingual, or monolingual. Mental Health. Community Connection's 12 diverse mental health programs are partly funded by Santa Cruz County Mental Health Services, the State of California Department of Rehabilitation, and the Kaiser Permanente Foundation. ( Mariposa Wellness, 2023)

## **Problem Model Background and Literature Review**

### **Mental Health Illness**

Mental illness refers to a range of conditions where individuals experience intense feelings of tension and anxiety that significantly impair their ability to function in daily life. These conditions can vary in type and severity, with some individuals unable to care for themselves or leave their homes, while others may experience psychosis, including delusions and hallucinations. However, a mental health concern becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and begin to affect functioning. A mental illness can make people miserable and cause problems in their daily lives, such as at school, work, or in relationships. Usually, symptoms can be managed with medications and talk therapy ("Mental illness: symptoms and causes," 2019). Mental health has been an ongoing issue nationwide. Since Covid 19, communities have seen a significant increase in the need for mental health services. Mental health is indispensable to our well-being, satisfying family and interpersonal relationships, and positive contributions to the community or society. Mental health is the number-one cause of disability. McKenzie et al. (2016) Many people have mental health concerns because "too many individuals from Santa Cruz County have untreated mental health disorders." Low-income communities lack the resources or knowledge about what services are available to them. The majority of individuals with mental health disorders are susceptible to infringements of their human rights, often experience poor physical health, and live in poverty. This is primarily due to their isolation from several development sectors, including education, human rights, emergency responses, employment, and emergency services. Affected

communities are susceptible populations; they face stigma, discrimination, and a high incidence of sexual and physical abuse. (Knifton & Inglis, 2020)

### ***Contributing Factors***

#### ***Childhood Trauma and Mental Health***

It is significant to remember that childhood trauma is an integral part of life. Unfortunately, recurring memories can cause childhood trauma to become more severe as an adult without any treatment or support. Childhood experiences characterized by adversity and trauma, such as neglect and abuse, are associated with elevated risks of untimely mortality in children. Within the United States, these events impact almost 50% of the population, an estimated 51.5 million individuals. The magnitude of this figure underscores the need for immediate action to tackle the problem of inadequate mental well-being in the United States and other nations. Recent research demonstrates a direct correlation between adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and the manifestation of mental health problems in adulthood. (Gu et al., 2022) There is evidence that a link exists between it and slowed cognitive development, adverse physiological effects, poor social development, and a higher risk of mental disorders. All of these things raise the risk of having mental health problems. It is crucial to address this issue to reduce the suffering many people experience globally. Adverse childhood experiences differed considerably among mental diseases. Furthermore, a notable 25.8% of patients diagnosed with drug use disorders reported experiencing childhood trauma. There was a significant correlation between emotional abuse scores and illness severity. This means that as the total trauma score increased, the mental

problem became more serious. Even though there is evidence that comorbidity needs comprehensive and integrated therapy, research shows that only 18% of substance abuse treatment programs and 9% of mental health treatment organizations can help people who have been diagnosed with both conditions. (NIDA, 2021) This evidence means there is a significant need for the community.

### ***Substance Use and Mental Health Challenges***

In a survey conducted in 2020, results showed that 40.3 million people aged 12 and older had an SUD in the past year, including 28.3 million people who had an alcohol use disorder. 18.4 million people had an illicit drug use disorder, and 6.5 million people struggled with both alcohol and illicit drug use disorders. It does not come as a surprise that individuals diagnosed with severe mental illness (SMI) show a high correlation with substance abuse and dependency. Data indicated that 23.3 percent of individuals with an SMI diagnosis also abuse or are dependent on prohibited substances or alcohol (SAMHSA, 2013). This supports the notion that individuals are seeking relief from mental health disorder symptoms through substance use. Substance abuse can assist in the management of symptoms for specific individuals, yet many will self-medicate illegally in order to control symptoms. In a survey conducted in 2020, respondents who suffered from AMI were classified as having perceived treatment for substance use. Therefore, the knowledge from this article provides an evidence-based approach to acting quickly and supporting severely mentally ill patients in community-based programs that speed up their recoveries. Research has shown that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) increase the risk of poor health-related outcomes in later life, and early treatment will allow providers to diagnose better and provide treatment options for clients. (Rokach & Clayton, 2023).

### ***Stigma and discrimination***

Stigma and discrimination are often the main reasons adults feel they do not need help.

According to research, many people highly value the social pressure of being "normal." In many modern societies and countries, negative emotions are seen as a bad thing that must be fixed immediately. (Dejonckheere et al., 2022) This stigma contributes to seeking adequate treatment.

The consequences of being diagnosed with a mental health disorder, or SUD, can create instability and a lack of intellect, therefore causing severe changes in their emotions. The hardships of dealing with undiagnosed mental health and SUD can cause the patient to suffer from suicidal thoughts and unusual behaviors. In 2020, 12.2 million people reported having thoughts of suicide, and 3.2 million people had actual plans to hurt themselves. 1.2 million people have attempted suicide in the past year. (SAMHSA, 2019) Treatment access and staying in treatment are only the first steps to seeing successful outcomes. However, adults with mental or substance use disorders cannot be treated if they cannot gain access to treatment, nor can they be treated successfully if treatment is not practical. (Mertens & Weisner, 2002). Mental health and substance use can create severe instability in patients' daily functions. This can prevent employment, family gatherings, relationships, and more. It makes families dealing with these situations lose structure due to the instability and chaos that AMI and SUD cause.

Mental health is often seen as the idea of stigma, focusing on people suffering from mental health challenges and reflecting on the possibility that the term does not seek to project the gravity of the situation or experiences associated with these individuals. A significant number of individuals tend to lack understanding of what would be expected of them in providing mentally challenged people with a safe environment to feel safe in, regardless of the illness. According to



Yamawaki et al. (1990), people with a wide array of mental health issues encounter situations where others do not understand their situation or conditions, which results in significant distress due to stigma and discrimination. From that, it is evident that researchers tend to consider the alienation of people with mental health issues as stigmatization, arguing that this works towards creating a negative approach towards handling such individuals, causing major conflicts with providers that fully understand the client-centered approach. (Corrigan & WATSON, 2002)

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### **Consequences**

#### ***Dysfunctional Families and Mental Health***

According to research, those who were raised in a family where at least one parent has a mental illness tend to have poorer self-esteem during their childhood, have more intense feelings of discomfort during their teenage years (known as dysphoria), and develop social anxiety in maturity. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as the state of subjective well-being when individuals have a sense of self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, inter-generational reliance, and the ability to reach their intellectual and emotional potential. (*The World Health Report 2001: Mental Disorders Affect One in Four People*, 2001)

Dysfunctional families arise from a culture that is emotionally deceitful, shame-oriented, and patriarchal, with attitudes that do not foster a nurturing atmosphere for children to flourish. Families with dysfunctional dynamics are characterized by parents exhibiting inadequate parenting abilities, which may have developed as a result of mental disorders. The type of 'dysfunction' being referred to encompasses several factors such as neglect, aggression, abandonment, shame, love that is contingent upon certain conditions, inconsistent parenting, the absence of clear boundaries, bias based on gender, intolerance towards sexuality, and suppression of emotions. (Taillieu et al., 2016) Any individual can relate to one or more of the qualities mentioned above, although the extent or severity of the dysfunction varies. Despite appearing very chaotic, these families ultimately foster an environment where all members feel loved, respected, and supported. Conversely, highly dysfunctional households can lead to profound unhappiness among children. Specific behavioral patterns, although not classified as mental

### ***Homelessness***

Mental health has been a prominent leading cause of homelessness; the public health department has since taken great strides in developing housing plans because most mental hospitals are decentralized, with less effort towards supporting community programs that are meant for people experiencing homelessness. The prevalence of homelessness among individuals with mental illness has had a significant impact on the provision of healthcare services, resulting in a decline in quality. The main factor contributing to the prevalence of homelessness among those with mental illness is the absence of a comprehensive public housing policy. The issue of mental illness and homelessness is significant due to the widespread decentralization of mental hospitals and the little government backing for community services that cater to the homeless population.

Once again, this issue has evolved into a societal problem due to several governmental policies, particularly inpatient admission, resulting in a significant increase in the number of individuals being discharged from mental hospitals. Consequently, this has increased the homeless population (Smartt et al., 2019). Homelessness harms the overall provision of healthcare to patients, particularly as the population of mentally ill homeless individuals grows. Consequently, this necessitates the requirement for enhanced pharmaceuticals and supportive establishments. Studying the issue of homelessness among individuals with mental illness is crucial, as it sheds light on the extent to which governmental institutions have been hesitant to treat mental health difficulties. Once again, mental illness plays a significant role in American culture, impacting both the whole delivery of healthcare and the government's expenditure on medical costs. The government has prioritized tackling homelessness by focusing on housing, which has been the central area of concern for the public health department. Homeless individuals who have mental illness face significant health risks and potential social disparities. The quality of their housing significantly influences the overall health of individuals, whereas homelessness can give rise to significant health issues. The mortality rates of homeless individuals are known to rise significantly, particularly in affluent regions, where they are three times higher than the general population. (Fischer, 1991) The predominant comprehension of psychiatric symptoms among is homeless individuals include behaviors and activities that occur as a result of mental illness or the stress experienced on the streets. Since homelessness, people occasionally develop negative thoughts, leading to stress, anxiety, and sometimes depression. Aubry et al. (2020) found in a study that homelessness intervention indirectly improves mental health among millions of homeless people in major developed countries. Besides solving the housing challenge, the

housing and income assistance intervention reduces stress and depression among the affected persons, thus leading to mental wellness and positive self-esteem.

### ***Suicide and Mental health challenges***

Mental or physical health problems are often a consequence of living in poverty, but these problems can also cause problems that impede self-sufficiency. Santa Cruz County has a great need for more mental health services, and unfortunately, there is only one mental health provider for the 310 residents who require treatment. The availability and distribution of health services across the country restrict access to care. Healthcare facilities tend to be more concentrated on the peninsula, presenting proximity challenges for low-income residents living further away or with limited transportation options. Additionally, 11% of residents do not have health insurance. Most uninsured are low-income individuals and families who are technically above the poverty line. (Knifton & Inglis, 2020)

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Childhood Trauma	“Too many individuals from Santa Cruz County have untreated mental health disorders.”	Dysfunctional Families
Substance Use and Alcohol Use		Homelessness,
Stigma and discrimination		Suicide and mental health challenges

Homeless individuals with substance use disorders often have hardships accessing treatment, even if they have public health insurance (Kushel et al., 2001; Wenzel et al., 2001). People enrolled in a health maintenance organization (HMO) are more likely to initiate treatment after assessment if they are employed (with pressure from employers or colleagues to enter treatment) and have more severe substance use disorders (Mertens & Weisner, 2002). The consequences of being diagnosed with a mental health disorder, or SUD, can create instability and a lack of intellect, therefore causing severe changes in their emotions. The hardships of dealing with undiagnosed mental health and SUD can cause the patient to suffer from suicidal thoughts and unusual behaviors. In 2020, 12.2 million people had thoughts of suicide, and 3.2 million people had plans to hurt themselves. 1.2 million people have attempted suicide in the past year. (SAMHSA, 2019). Treatment access and staying in treatment are the only steps to seeing successful outcomes. However, adults with mental or substance use disorders cannot be treated if they cannot gain access to treatment, nor can they be adequately treated if treatment is not effective (Merte & Weisner, 2002). Mental health and substance use can create severe instability in patients' daily functions. Mental health challenges can prevent employment, family gatherings, relationships, and more. It makes families dealing with these situations lose structure due to the instability and chaos that AMI and SUD cause.

## **Project Justification**

The primary purpose of this project would be to obtain more incoming referrals and bring more awareness of the services that Mariposa Wellness Center provides throughout Santa Cruz County. The second goal would be to hopefully welcome more participants into our agency in South County through community collaboration. This would allow the behavioral health department to be more involved and provide more incoming and outgoing referrals for clients who want counseling and support groups to help manage and treat their illnesses. In this project, the focus would be to let the Latinex community know that Mariposa Wellness Center is a non-profit organization that seeks to provide better care and adequate treatment to all participants. In doing this project, Mariposa wishes to collect information on why people feel they don't need treatment or refuse it. The third goal is to collect data from participants and community members about mental health awareness in this community and allow them to give feedback about what they would like to see get better at the center. For many people, Mental health support groups are outlets for better self-care, building new friendships, and isolation reduction, such as meditation, casual Tuesdays, art therapy, outdoor walks, and women's groups. The clients can work on centering themselves when feeling overwhelmed and unsure. Meditation helps calm any rising thoughts about their challenges, self-harm, and anxiety while also completing a self-care regime. Having casual coffee on Tuesdays with clients allows the mentor to build rapport with the clients. allowing the participants to see other places and feel safe with Mariposas staff but, most importantly, feel supported. Therefore, they release any stress and are

less obligated to disclose only what they feel at that moment. It has been seen that support groups help clients feel more confident and willing to share in a group setting with other participants who are struggling with similar symptoms.

### **Expected Outcomes and Assessment Plan**

The expected outcome would be to help the agency increase clients and improve the level of engagement from all participants. It would help promote mental health awareness in the community and allow collaboration with other agencies to accept more referrals. Allowing more incoming participants would allow participants to receive more services and be invited to participate in the mariposa activities. It would benefit the community to educate low-income communities about mental health, which is a vital expectation for participant rights and advocacy.

The assessment plan is to provide mental health awareness and pass out flyers to community members who do not approach the tabling event willingly. Allowing the intern to work on professional development and professional communication. It would give people the chance to ask questions about what mental health is and how to tell if they are suffering from AMI. The outcome would allow Mariposa Agency to get more funding and hire more staff to be able to do more outings for the participants. This would allow participants who have been attending treatment to do things outside of their everyday routine. This would also allow the participants to do more hands-on activities outside their everyday routine with staff to provide support.

### **Implementation Process**

A 2-day farmers' market event that was presented to the community for mental health awareness in the small community of Watsonville, CA. The outreach and marketing event was planned for October 2023. The intern had to meet with the city to see if a permit fee would be required for a 2-day tabling event. The intern met with the mentor, who helped map out the appropriate flyer. Similar flyers were gathered that drew attention, and collaboration was done to find appropriate fonts and adequate pictures to finish the flyer and bring the final draft to the mentor for final approval.

The mentor instructed the intern to distribute the flyers to the community members to inform the neighboring agencies about the Mental Health Awareness event and what Mariposa Wellness Center does for the Watsonville community. Intern gathered all the needed supplies for this event's success. The mentor agreed to participate in the process of making the flyers and gathering the needed supplies for this event. Mariposa Wellness Center has had outreach events; therefore, leftover incentives from previous tabling events will be recovered to save funds.

This event would be implemented in a location known to be a high pedestrian traffic street. A location where the intern would be able to have the most face-to-face interactions with community members. The interactions will allow the intern to answer any community concerns or questions. Intern would then inform the community members of what Mariposa Wellness Center does, such as mental health support groups, individual check-ins, meditation groups, group outings such as fairs, movies, lunches, women's groups, art therapy groups, and other types of services that are provided to the community. The intern would have this 2-day farmers market event towards the last week of October or early November. This would allow the intern more time to gather other vital information to provide to community members. Inter will



construct a small, 3-question survey that is still being constructed. This survey will bring back data to the agency for future marketing and outreach events; any feedback given will be brought back to the agency's leaders. In the process of this table, marketing and outreach events would allow more open-referred clients and more client engagement. This project would allow room for growth and engagement within the agency. There is a high need for client interactions, and the purpose of this event is to allow the agency to bring awareness to low-income communities in Santa Cruz County and also bring in more inbound referrals to any of the Mariposa Wellness Center programs. The needs would be met if the agency's client referrals increased and more participants engaged daily. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the scope of work in Appendix A.

### **Project Results**

The primary purpose or goal of the project was to bring awareness to the community about Mariposa mental health services for adults only and educate the Latinx community about the services Mariposa Wellness Center provides under the Community Connections umbrella. These services are individualized plans for participants and provide additional support if required. The findings from the outreach indicated that the tabling event had a favorable influence on community members and their general contentment. Bringing awareness to the community and offering more rewarding services will bring a sense of awareness to the community and hopefully bring in more grant funding, which is essential to keep these needed services going.

The outcome of this event was successful, and we have seen an increase in participants. Before the event, Mariposa Wellness Center had a total of 18 participants in person, not telehealth, and outside facility visits. After the outreach event, we saw an increase of 5 additional participants, making the in-person total of 23 participants. The agency has been given more funding for a new mental health specialist to come on board. This job opening is to provide more active groups for the community.

### ***Conclusion***

Mental health awareness is vital nationwide due to its big problem. Unfortunately, the stigma behind having a mental health diagnosis is somehow seen as being damaged or crazy, which is not the truth. Finding local services is only possible with the proper support and health care. Most importantly, addressing mental health awareness resources and other familiar services that target different populations is vital. For several reasons, the mental health initiative adheres to best practice standards. To begin, Mariposa Wellness Center is based on real-world evidence, which means that the treatments and techniques used have been thoroughly tested in research studies and have been shown to work. This guarantees that the initiative is centered on substantiated evidence rather than speculation or unverified hypotheses. The outreach project was also designed using a person-centered approach, which considers every individual's distinct requirements, inclinations, and objectives. It is vital in the field of mental health care, as every individual's encounter with mental health problems is different.

This implies the collaboration of behavioral health clinicians from several disciplines, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, mental health specialists, and occupational therapists, to deliver complete, adequate care. Finally, the outreach project includes a flyer

stating the agency's address and services. I used a conversational approach to ask the community members questions about the types of services they would like to see in the community and how the ongoing assessment and enhancement procedures can provide better mental health outcomes, which is a fundamental element of the optimal methodology. This guaranteed that my outreach project was consistently enhanced and perfected by utilizing inputs and outcomes from different perspectives. It allowed me to inform the community of the types of services Mariposa Wellness can offer for mental health support and treatment. This outreach allowed me, as part of my community connections, to work with other agencies to provide the best care possible. It allows the agency to get more funding to benefit the community and participants. A few other new positions have been added to the program due to the increase in incoming referrals and the COVID restrictions being lifted. However, it is still based on referrals, which is unfortunate. Upon my return from the outreach event, I provided the mentor with my results and suggestions from the public and participants. The participants suggested it would be “nice to go out more on group outings and do more social and real-life skills that can help them learn to be more independent, such as cooking classes or healthy eating habit groups, exercise groups, movie nights, dancing classes, etc. also engage in local events and more educational workshops that can be brought into the schools at an early age. I thought these were great suggestions for the agency. I reported to my mentor that community members would like to see more of the hard work I have completed and the outreach project. The mentor stated “ No matter the number of people that came to approach the table, what matters is that you are making a difference in this outreach”, and "You have been doing such an amazing job at this internship.” I stated back to him Yes, you are right, Mark! He then said, "You have been doing great work on all aspects of

the internship, and I have seen growth professionally”. (M. Vasquez, personal communication, November 16, 2023)

### **Recommendations**

In conclusion, outreach tabling is an important tool for promoting mental health awareness and providing support to those who need it. By using best practices for outreach, such as those outlined by Mental Health America, we can help to create a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing mental health and seeking help when necessary. Having more weekly or monthly outreach and community engagement will allow Mariposa Wellness Center to bring in more participants and will allow the organization to grow staff members due to the increase in client care and rehabilitation groups. It would also be beneficial to inform the community of the types of services Mariposa Wellness can offer for mental health. This outreach allowed the community connections to work with other agencies to provide the best care possible. It allows the agency to get more funding to benefit the community and participants.

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