

Desert Hot Springs welcomes new health center



Sherry Barkas, The Desert Sun 1:09 p.m. PDT October 16, 2014

County and city officials gathered Wednesday morning to open the new Riverside County Behavioral Health and Nutritional Services Center in Desert Hot Springs.

In the works for about eight years, the \$17.5 million, 25,000-square-foot center on Palm Drive brings Riverside County Mental Health and the Women Infant and Children nutritional programs under one roof, making the services more easily accessible.

(Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun)

"Unfortunately there are many, many challenges in today's society that cause people to need the assistance of our mental health community ...," county Supervisor John Benoit said. "We're very, very pleased that we've brought that kind of important service ... a little closer to home for those who have to travel for any assistance."

About 6,441 Desert Hot Springs adults had an emotional, mental or behavioral problem that concerned them in 2013, according to the most recent Health Assessment Resource Center data. Of those with a concern or diagnosed mental health disorder in the city of about 27,000, just 33.8 percent had visited a mental health professional.

The new mental health clinic will provide services to all ages, in particular at-risk children who have been in and out of trouble and are part of a counseling program to help them get back on the right path and stay out of juvenile hall or prison, said John Grisham, desert region administrator for the county's Department of Mental Health.

There will also be substance abuse programs and counseling — group and individual — offered, along with more integrated care for older adults, many of whom suffer from depression or need help managing their medications and physical issues, Grisham said.

The nutritional center has programs and services for people enrolled in Women, Infant and Children, a federal assistance program for low-income pregnant women, breastfeeding women and infants and children under the age of 5.

"We're serving 3,000 people a month in Desert Hot Springs alone," said Susan Herrington, director of Riverside County Public Health. With the new building, she expects that number to climb to 4,000 as it also draws residents from surrounding areas.

Public Health will be working in partnership with Desert Healthcare District, the city of Desert Hot Springs and the Palm Springs Unified School District, to also offer nutritional and obesity prevention programs to all ages — in and out of WIC — in an effort to help reduce the risk of diabetes, heart attack and stroke.

"We're working on increasing access to healthy foods and increasing physical activity," she said.

Benoit and Desert Hot Springs Mayor Adam Sanchez also announced that some of the land adjoining the center would be used for a community park with a youth sports facility.

Combined with the recently built Desert Hot Springs Community Health and Wellness Center and new Borrego medical clinic, the center adds to Sanchez's vision of Desert Hot Springs becoming the "best health and wellness city in the entire Coachella Valley."

The center also answers a lot of transportation needs, making these facilities and programs a short bus ride rather than hours long bus rides to centers in other areas of the valley, Sanchez said.

Desert Sun reporter Victoria Pelham contributed to this report.

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