

# A SOURCE OF HELP FOR MENTALLY ILL

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With scratched and bruised fingers, Elaine pulls aside the plywood she has used to block the windows of her tiny apartment. Her eyes widening with fear, the 66-year-old presses her face against the glass to talk to the people who have come to her door.

It wasn't difficult for Vincent Tamburelli and Michelle Nisely to find Elaine's home. Tucked in a well-kept Fort Lauderdale cul-de-sac, hers is the only apartment that has paint smeared across the door and windows. A trail of green paint leads from the stairs to the back door that has been kicked in.

Elaine rarely comes outside, except, according to a neighbor, for a fully clothed dip in the complex pool.

Tamburelli and Nisely, licensed clinical social workers, took the neighbor's call at Henderson Mental Health Care Center. They belong to a team of crisis counselors, including psychologists and psychiatrists, who travel across Broward (in unmarked cars) calming potentially dangerous mental meltdowns.

Elaine, though paranoid and ranting, isn't an immediate threat to herself or



PHOTOS BY J. ALBERT DIAZ / HERALD STAFF

**ON THE JOB:** Jane Squillante, a crisis clinician at the Henderson Mental Health Care Center's walk-in clinic in Fort Lauderdale, screens a call. She can give counseling over the phone.

others, Tamburelli decides. They ask whether she's all right, can they come in, does she have food? To these questions, the woman says she's fine. She won't let them inside. So, without the law enforcement that usually accompanies the social workers on their calls, they cannot force their help upon her.

Staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by psychologists, psychiatrists

and master's-level social workers, Henderson's two mobile units — one specializing in children, the other in adults — field some 200 calls a week.

"A lot of it is talking to people, calming them," said Tamburelli, a longtime county social worker with an imposing solid stature and kind blue eyes. "People call when they are overwhelmed."



PHOTOS BY J. ALBERT DIAZ/HERALD STAFF

**HANDLING A CASE:** Gayle Lehr, right, a therapist at the Henderson Mental Health Care Center's walk-in clinic in Fort Lauderdale, holds a session with a client who didn't want to be identified by name. Henderson Mental Health Center runs 41 programs in Broward. The clinic alone sees about 500 patients a week.

## WALK-IN CLINIC

Operating out of Henderson's flagship walk-in clinic, 1404 S. Andrews Ave. in Fort Lauderdale, the mobile crisis unit is just one of Henderson Mental Health Care Center's 41 programs in Broward. The clinic alone sees about 500 patients a week.

South Florida's oldest and most comprehensive public mental health agency, founded 50 years ago this May by Fort Lauderdale's Junior League, Henderson has become known nationally as one of the best providers of public care for indigent and low-income mentally ill people.

As one of the few public healthcare agencies to view hospitalization of the mentally disabled as a last resort, Henderson has enjoyed county government support.

The Broward County Commission granted it \$1.5 million for two new programs for emotionally disturbed adolescents. Michael Elwell, director of the county's Children's Services Administration, said, "Without Henderson, there's no doubt a huge section of the population that need mental healthcare would suffer."

With a 2003 budget of \$28.3 million from the state and county, Henderson

is supported by its nearly \$10.5 million in annual contracts with the Department of Children and Families. But despite cuts in disability funding from the department, Henderson is poised to remain an anomaly in Florida, which ranks 38th out of 50 states in per capita spending on mental health services, according to Robert Constantine, president of Florida Council for Community Mental Health.

"It's difficult to get an accurate assessment and the number changes from year to year," he said. "But I take away the message that we are always near the bottom. So that in most cases, like Henderson, you have to build on what you have."

## MOM WAS DEPRESSED

At the walk-in clinic, therapist Gayle Lehr, 32, has spent the morning talking with Nora, a 40-year-old woman overcoming depression following the end of her 10-year marriage. Nora's husband was cheating on her and the divorce was her idea, she said. But unemployed and suddenly a single mom to two children, Nora was desperate, angry and depressed.

"I'm a different person than I was when I came in here," she said. "I

doubted I could face life back then. I thank God for this place because there's no way I could afford anything else."

She heard about Henderson from a friend who had received treatment at the clinic. Like the one in seven Americans who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford the skyrocketing premiums of many insurance plans, Nora pays \$5 a session, the lowest sliding-scale price for therapy. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 13 percent of all Floridians are without health insurance — but even if they do have it, said Constantine, it's likely the plan's coverage of mental health is inadequate.

"Even people with insurance through an employer often turn to public assistance for mental health because they can't afford medication or treatment out of pocket — it's too expensive," he said.

No matter how small or big the client's reason for experiencing emotional trauma might seem — for example, teenage girls have gone in distraught over bad breakups with their boyfriends — Henderson's therapists

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— GAYLE LEHR,  
therapist

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take everyone seriously, including a middle-age man who drove all the way from Clearwater to Broward with one goal: to check into a hotel anonymously and kill himself.

## 'LOST HIS JOB'

"His wife left him, took their kid, and he lost his job in a single day," Lehr said. "On his way down, he stopped at a gas station to get a phone number and read our ad in the front of the phonebook. I won't ever forget him because he came in here and told me that he'd left his gun in his car. That

guy thought he wanted to die." Lehr talked with him for hours, then asked whether he'd like a ride to the hospital — an offer Henderson makes to clients who they think would benefit.

Yet, Henderson prefers therapeutic rehabilitation to committing clients to a hospital. The Clearwater man spent time in a Broward hospital, then went home. "He was a rational person who was having a really hard time," Lehr said. "When someone comes in, we try to get them to slow down and talking. A good portion of them improve just with that."

Although Henderson is funded to treat Broward residents, clinicians don't turn away out-of-county clients. They will usually see them that day and then refer them to agencies closer to home.

About 30 clients a month who receive therapy at the walk-in clinic are referred by Henderson's Crisis Stabilization Unit, a 20-bed locked facility for indigent severely psychiatrically disturbed people who need constant supervision. "By connecting our services, someone doesn't get left wondering how to navigate the system, which can really get complicated," said Rebekah Paone, a licensed clinical social worker and Henderson's clinical crisis director. She juggles a schedule between the facility on Northwest 19th Avenue in Fort Lauderdale and the walk-in clinic.

#### STAFF PSYCHIATRISTS

Those clients who are clinically mentally ill, as opposed to facing a situational crisis, see one of Henderson's two walk-in clinic staff psychiatrists.

Psychiatrist Sharon Brown treats between three and six patients a day, a rare, manageable caseload compared with most in the social-service arena.

"Professionally, I wouldn't want a private practice. Here, I'm seeing people with mental illnesses who have never sought medical treatment [for it] in their lives," she said. "I'm doing first diagnosis



PHOTOS BY J. ALBERT DIAZ / HERALD STAFF

**A SAFE PLACE:** A 15-year-old boy living at Charlon House, a group home run by Henderson, is in his room with his collection of Matchbox toys.

with people and then helping them move on. We're not into working with someone for years. That's not the goal."

Spending time at the walk-in clinic, it's clear that there's truth to Paone and Brown's assertions that patients are seen within 15 minutes of arriving. A man who says he is having hallucinations is ushered back within three minutes. "The worst thing someone can do is go to the ER and say they are having suicidal thoughts," Paone said. "You'll be Baker Acted [under the state law requiring potentially dangerous people spend 72 hours in a hospital]. If someone comes in here and says that, it's business as usual. We're going to see you fast and treat you carefully." Henderson also stands apart from its counterpart agencies around the state in that its 600 employees boast a relatively low turnover. Salaries are competitive with other Florida agencies and because behavioral health is a niche market, Henderson employees like Tamburelli have little reason to look elsewhere for a job.

#### 3 CALLS IN 7 MINUTES

Employed as a mobile crisis clinician for six years, he is calm taking three calls in seven minutes — one a suicide threat.

A week after visiting Elaine, who would not allow Tamburelli and Nisely into her apartment, the woman's case is referred to Adult Protective Services, an arm of DCF that protects the elderly and vulnerable. A schizophrenic who frequently forgets her medication, Elaine has been an APS client for at least a year.

"So we're letting them orchestrate what happens next because we try not to crowd the bureaucracy with more paperwork," Tamburelli said. "APS starts with it and continues with it."

Elaine's APS caseworker would not discuss the woman's case with The Herald, citing confidentiality issues.

"We'll be there to step in again if we are called again," Tamburelli said. "In some ways, we're a link to grab onto for people who are not just lost mentally and lost in the system. That, to me, is the definition of social work."



**HENDERSON**  
MENTAL HEALTH CENTER

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