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By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

As mental health care services in the state struggle to survive, so do many Kansas who face depression.

Data released this month showed that the number of suicides reported in Kansas increased in 2012 by 30 percent. More than 500 people in the Sunflower State ended their lives.



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In Southwest Kansas, the statistics are even more troubling in light of dwindling resources for those with mental health issues. The practicing psychiatrist in Garden City announced he will resign at the end of October; the psychiatrist based in Elkhart has reached retirement age; there is no psychiatrist living in Liberal, and the licensed nurse practitioner who works at Southwest Guidance Center is able to come only one day a week.

“I don’t know how much longer the area can sustain this,” said Leslie Bissell, SWGC director and doctor of psychology. “Beginning in November, everyone involved in mental health care in the area will be aggressively recruiting a psychiatrist.”

The need is real. In the four-county area served by SWGC, about one person a day requires intervention services.

“We average between 25 and 30 screens a month,” Bissell said. “This is a person in crisis, where either they or someone with them has identified them as saying they want to harm themselves or someone else, or they’re doing some behavior that puts them at risk.”

Bissell, or another staff member holding master’s degree training or higher, must respond to such calls immediately.

“At 2 a.m. if someone is at the emergency room, talking about wanting to kill themselves, I have to provide services, regardless of whether they can pay for it or not, regardless of whether they qualify for Medicaid or not — and I want to,” said Bissell. “That’s what we’re here for.”

People willing to seek professional help are then referred to the psychiatric unit at St. Catherine’s Hospital in Garden City. It’s the nearest option for private care in the area, since Southwest Medical Center closed its psychiatric unit in 2009. Patients who clearly require care but are unwilling to make the decision to seek help are involuntarily taken to Larned State Hospital.

“I would say 60 to 80 percent of the people who go to Larned are not known to the mental health care community,” Bissell said. “They’re not people we’ve seen, who are being treated, who have a history or family members that can provide more information.”



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