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AIDS Alabama expands service to address growing mental health need

Published: Tuesday, May 24th 2016, 10:40 pm CDT
Updated: Wednesday, May 25th 2016, 11:07 am CDT

By **Jamiese Price, Reporter** CONNECT

BIRMINGHAM, AL (WBRC) - AIDS Alabama is expanding its service. It comes at a time when the Centers for Disease has named the southeast as ground zero for the HIV epidemic.

The Living Wellness Outpatient Center will open Wednesday and it will focus on an area often overlooked when it comes to addressing the medical needs of HIV patients.

The center will focus on mental health. The Living Well Outpatient Center will be staffed with physicians, psychiatrist and therapists to handle growing behavioral problems from mental illness to substance abuse.

Clinical Director Mitch Tarver said treating the medical needs of HIV patients isn't enough. "HIV may not be the biggest condition in their life, often times mental illness and substance abuse accompany that."

Tarver said often times someone who has HIV is also battling depression, stress and anxiety. Getting help, though, comes at a cost.

"A lot of consumers we serve have long wait times in the community for mental health treatment," he said.

AIDS Alabama CEO Kathie Hiers said sometimes the wait time is up to five months.

"If someone builds up the courage to come in and ask for help you sure don't want to tell them, see you in three, four five months.," Hiers said. "We want to be able to help meet people's needs immediately."

She hopes to eliminate the problem with the wellness center.

"Most people don't realize Birmingham is number 17 for rates of infections in the country. We're hoping with these behavioral health services that we can get folks back on a path of wellness," continued Hiers.

In addition to behavioral health services, the Living Well Outpatient Center will also offer GED, vocational and independent living skills training.

They'll also conduct HIV and STD screenings. The new center is directly across from AIDS Alabama on 7th Avenue South. Hours are Monday through Friday, 8am to 5pm.

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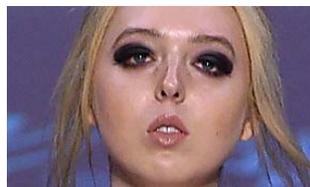
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