



DIRECTOR'S NEWSLETTER



Happy Spring! With the new season, we embrace change and growth. This edition brings exciting updates, including new County Health leadership, reinforced commitments to equity, the celebration of community recovery initiatives and more. Also, celebrate the season with San Mateo County Parks' new self-guided tour app! [Click the link](#) to download the app and enjoy tours such as Reptiles of Edgewood Park & Natural Preserve and Geology of Earthquakes at Sawyer Camp Trail. Happy trails!

Welcoming Colleen Chawla and Honoring Louise Rogers' Legacy

BHRS is delighted to welcome Colleen Chawla as the new chief of San Mateo County Health, effective February 2025. Colleen joins us from Alameda County Health, where she has served as director since 2017. Her extensive experience in health policy and administration, which began with volunteer work on an AIDS information hotline over three decades ago, highlights her commitment to health equity and justice. Colleen brings a wealth of expertise to our community and we are fortunate to have her join us.



This change comes as we bid farewell to Louise Rogers, who retired in March after leading San Mateo County Health since 2015. During her tenure, she steered the department through many challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, guiding a team of over 2,000 with kindness, resilience and unwavering dedication to public health. BHRS expresses profound gratitude for her remarkable contributions, particularly to BHRS, where she served as director from 2008 - 2011.

Board of Supervisors Reaffirms Commitment to Vulnerable Communities

On January 28, the Board of Supervisors reaffirmed their commitment to serving San Mateo County's most vulnerable populations, including immigrants, people of color, LGBTQIA+, women, those with disabilities and the indigenous community. The resolution acknowledges that the rhetoric and anticipated policies of the new federal administration have created immense fear, anxiety and uncertainty for many communities. It reassures the County remains committed to advancing equity and belonging, and upholding the designation as a Certified Welcoming County. The Board meeting featured remarks from BHRS director Dr. Jei Africa. Notably, Jei shared, "Let me end by reaffirming that our transgender and gender expansive communities are vital members and contributors to the richness of this county. We all deserve the freedom to be who we are. Transgender rights are human rights."

Cordilleras Health and Healing Campus Moves Towards Completion

The new Cordilleras Health and Healing campus, which spans 20 acres near Redwood City, offers programs for adults who have prolonged mental illness and substance use challenges. There are four locked Mental Health Rehabilitation Centers and 57 housing units on the campus. The new programs provide structured support for those who are conserved and stepping down from an acute hospitalization. Additionally, it provides housing for adults who are unhoused and can benefit from onsite support to live independently.



Mental Health Rehabilitation Centers

All four Mental Health Rehabilitation Centers (MHRCs) at the Cordilleras Health and Healing Campus are now in operation. Each MHRC is managed by a different provider with expertise in supporting recovery for people with mental health and substance use challenges: Sage House is operated by Telecare, Willow House by Caminar, Ponderosa House by Crestwood Behavioral Health, and Acacia House by Stars Behavioral Health. These centers are designed to offer personalized support to individuals as they work towards their recovery goals, ultimately aiming to transition them to lower levels of care in the community. The MHRCs are intentionally designed to feel less institutional and be safe and supportive of recovery. To



support this, input from individuals with lived experience was incorporated throughout the process, from the Request for Proposal phase to the naming of the MHRCs. Each facility can accommodate 16 individuals and primary care services are provided by the San Mateo Medical Center, located on campus in the Canyon Vista Center building. MHRC amenities include two outdoor courtyards, a meditation room, exercise room and laundry facilities.

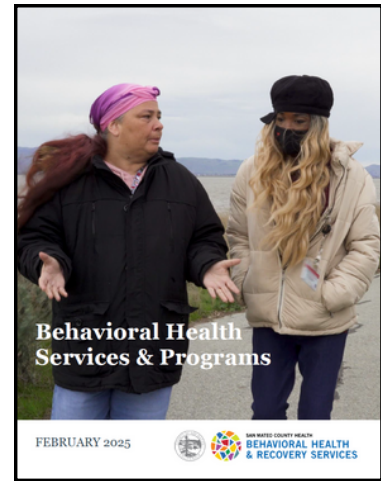
Co-Housing at Canyon Vista Center

The Canyon Vista Center, managed by Abode Property Management with services provided by Telecare, offers co-housing that includes supportive services to residents and access to shared spaces like an art center, spiritual room, gym and kitchen. The Pacific Dining Café, operated by Pacific Dining, is also now open, providing meals for both the Canyon Vista Center and the MHRCs. The remaining sections of the Cordilleras Health and Healing Campus, which includes a sports court and additional outdoor seating areas, are set to open by the end of the year.

By Talisha Racy, deputy director of adult services at BHR.

Comprehensive BHRS Services & Programs Guide Now Available

The Behavioral Health Services & Programs guide is now live on the BHRS website! This comprehensive resource offers a centralized document for BHRS services and offerings in San Mateo County. It includes descriptions of mental health and substance use services and programs, contact information, how to request services and more. Tailored for clients, community partners and County employees, this guide is designed to provide quick and easy access to BHRS information, all in one document. Updated annually, this guide ensures the most current information is available. To request an edit, please email HS_BHRS_Communications@smcgov.org.



Wildfire Safety Event on April 26

San Mateo County is hosting a Be Wildfire Safe & Ready event on Saturday April 26 from 10 - 11am at the San Mateo County Event Center. This free event is to help residents prepare for wildfire emergencies, including creating a Go Bag, evacuation procedures, planning for children and pets and considerations for those with limited mobility.

Health Equity Initiatives Seeking Co-Chair Roles Within BHRS

The Health Equity Initiatives (HEIs) are recruiting for new BHRS co-chairs. Established to address disparities in healthcare access, reduce stigma, and enhance the quality of care for marginalized communities in San Mateo County, the HEIs also aim to identify workforce training and development needs. By participating in the HEI's, you can drive meaningful change in our communities, enhance your personal and professional growth and development, and improve the lives of clients, communities and our workforce.

The co-chair roles are open for BHRS staff and require supervisor's approval. The position requires at maximum four hours per week, depending on the work of the HEI. Currently, five HEIs are recruiting: African American Community Initiative (AACI), Filipino Mental Health Initiative (FMHI), Latino/a/x Collaborative (LC), Pacific Islander Initiative (PII), and Spirituality Initiative (SI). BHRS Assistant Director and former co-chair of the Pride Initiative Scott Gruendl shares his insights, "A benefit of being a co-chair is that you become acquainted with the local provider community. This helps you establish professional relationships that improve client care because you are more familiar with the options you can provide your clients and know the contacts to initiate services."



For additional information about our amazing HEIs and the rewarding opportunities available as a co-chair, please reach out to Health Equity Initiative Coordinator Tia Bell (she/her) at tbell1@smcgov.org.

Scott, former co-chair of the Pride Initiative, alongside Dana Johnson, current co-chair, at the 2024 SMC Pride Event.

Voices of Recovery Connection Center: Making a Difference

At Voices of Recovery, we proudly celebrate the significant milestones achieved in supporting individuals on their recovery journeys. The Voices of Recovery Connection Center serves as a beacon of hope, providing a safe and nurturing community for those facing substance use and mental health challenges. This center is more than just a facility; it is a vital community rooted in peer support, education and empowerment. We consistently achieve transformative results by providing vital training and expanding access to critical recovery resources.

Since opening in November 2023, Recovery Connection Center achievements include:

- Building a strong and supportive recovery community with **202 participants** engaged in services.
- Training **41 individuals** in the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), equipping peers and professionals with tools for sustainable recovery.
- Expanding peer mentorship & coaching, offering one-on-one guidance and support to **63 participants**.
- Connecting **47 individuals** to services and resources, including mental health, substance use, housing and legal support.
- **Expanded health and wellness programs** by offering community workshops on self-care, nutrition, and mindfulness meditation. In addition, hosting Narcotics Anonymous (NA) group on Fridays.
- Facilitating **successful career pathways** by assisting individuals and staff with resume building, skill development and employment referrals.
- Empowering a volunteer program, with over **70 community volunteers** contributing their time and effort to strengthen the organization and their own recovery processes.

Program participants have expressed their positive experiences at the center. One participant shared, “I feel I come here, and I feel okay without judgment. I was anxious at first, but they really embraced me, and I look forward to coming.” A Wellness Recovery Action Plan facilitator also highlighted the benefits of our training, stating, “The training was helpful to give me the confidence I needed for public speaking and engaging with community members.” We invite you to join us in strengthening our community through upcoming events. The Juneteenth planning committee gathers every Thursday from 12 - 1pm, and the Recovery Happens Month planning committee meets on the third Wednesday at 12pm monthly. Together, we are building a brighter future. Recovery is possible, and it starts here!



By **ShaRon Heath**, executive director of Voices of Recovery. Connect with us today by phone, (650) 980 -1920, email, info@vorsmc.org, or visit vorsmc.org.

