

LIVING IN THE



HOW THE EAGLE RIVER
VALLEY IS TRANSFORMING
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

▶ BY KIMBERLY NICOLETTI

SUICIDE BELT

On a fall day in 2016, Gerry Lopez stood alone during a fire drill at his high school while his classmates talked and laughed within their groups of friends outside. At that moment, he decided to end his life. He was a junior.

“I came out of the building and had nobody. I was by myself,” Lopez recalls. “That day I told myself: ‘This is the last day I’m going to be in pain.’”

As a young child, Lopez had learned to suffer silently.

“In the Hispanic culture, men look down on depression as a sign of weakness,” Lopez says. “I was scared to lose my manliness, if that makes sense.”

To compound the shame, priests in Mexico, where Lopez was born, proclaimed suicide a mortal sin leading straight to hell.

“If you have these thoughts, there’s no cure,” Lopez says, summarizing his early religious education. “You just have to keep them to yourself.”

But after imagining how devastated his family would be if he completed suicide, Lopez overrode those early messages and turned to a school counselor, who referred him to a psychotherapist.

Through therapy, Lopez learned he wasn’t the only one burdened with depression; that was his first step to recovery.

“I thought I was the only one and everyone around me was all happy and didn’t have these thoughts,” he says.

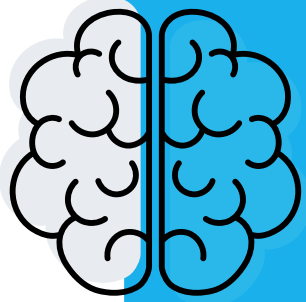
His therapist taught him to identify, express and accept his feelings and proactively practice self-care, whether that included watching movies, exercising or simply getting out in nature. She spurred ideas of how to expand his social life and make friends, and he eventually gained the confidence to join the school’s cross country team, where his teammates accepted and supported him.

“They encouraged me to be a better student and a better person, and to go to college,” he says.

Since then, Lopez has earned his associate degree in business administration. He still struggles with depression occasionally, “but now, I understand what to do and what my options are.”

As executive director of Eagle Valley Behavioral Health, Chris Lindley aims to ensure that mental health is treated with as much care and as many resources as physical health.

PHOTO BY SHANE MACOMBER



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**MICHELLE MEUTHING
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THE HOPE CENTER**

Running is one way Lopez clears his mind. Another aspect of his self-care involves reaching out to others. As the youth engagement coordinator for Eagle Valley Behavioral Health, he regularly shares his story with the community to decrease stigmas surrounding depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

"To be a part of this effort gives me hope," he says.

But not everyone has been as successful in finding help as Lopez. Some haven't yet connected with the proper support, and others, like Jamie Wahrer struggled for years through a faulty system of care.

A manager at a Vail spa, Wahrer sustained a brain injury from snowboarding in 2014, which caused dire depression.

"It was like a tidal wave was hitting me, and it just laid me flat," Wahrer recalls.

For two years, she ended up in the Emergency Department nearly every other day, due to panic attacks mixed with depression, she says.

"Sometimes doctors didn't understand what a panic attack was, and I felt like they classified me as a drug addict seeking medication," she says. "As far as resources, there wasn't much out there."

As a result, she ended up in the three nearest mental health facilities — one in Grand Junction and two in Denver.

"If I had to sum up brain injuries and depression, it would be one word: Alone," she says.

Fortunately, Wahrer learned to meditate and found a brain injury support group, as well as medication that helps. She also found a therapist who could sit with her and coach her through panic attacks.

"I'm a strong believer in support groups," she says. "I want people to know that they're not alone. There are resources out there. It's becoming more and more known that we have to address the mental health issue. Eagle County faces the challenge of education — a lot has to do with knowledge."

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Lopez, Wahrer and thousands of other locals have felt lost and isolated in their battle with mental health. Eagle County sits in what has been termed the "suicide belt," which stretches from Taos into Utah, Wyoming and Montana. The name stems from the disproportionate number of suicides in high-elevation resort and rural towns.

Experts have identified about 15 unique factors that contribute to elevated suicide rates in the

mountains. These include: high costs of living and financial strains, the Western ideal of rugged individualism ("pull yourself up by your bootstraps"), living far away from family and close friends, access to guns and a gun culture, altitude (shown to alter blood chemistry) and the "paradise paradox." The latter refers to newcomers moving to "paradise" to escape their problems, yet finding their troubles still exist.

Amidst these stressors, many locals work two jobs to make ends meet, so they have little time to build friendships. And, as more people focus on electronic devices, posts of their friends' "fabulous" lives bombard them.

"The biggest problem is the loneliness epidemic," says Lopez, who is 20. "We are the most connected, but also the most disconnected. A lot of our youth are depressed in middle school because they take the perfect pictures on social media seriously."

Lopez regularly talks to middle and high school students who feel pressured to fit in by being great athletes, getting high and drinking, or both.

"Either you participate in that or you're lonely and not cool," Lopez says.

Robust party scenes and expectations to be uber-athletic also surround adults. Nonparticipation can fuel loneliness, anxiety and depression, which many people attempt to avoid by drinking or using marijuana.

While physical health care resources are abundant in Eagle County, behavioral health care has lagged. There are half the number of mental health providers when compared to the state average, and according to a 2017 Mental Health America report, Colorado ranks an abysmal 43rd out of 50 states for mental health treatment and access to services.

On top of insufficient resources, mental health still carries a stigma, causing most people to suffer in silence.

"Our community values and rewards physical health achievement and does nothing at all like that around mental health," says Chris Lindley. "Many of us will talk about physical injuries; it's normal conversation ... (yet) the incidences of mental health issues are more prevalent. When we can talk as freely about mental health, we've won."

Lindley has been appointed the executive director of the nonprofit Eagle Valley Behavioral Health. He wants the community to spend as much money, time and energy on mental health as it does on physical health.

"It's 100% connected," he says. "You cannot be physically healthy without being mentally healthy, and vice versa."

THE TIPPING POINT

Visits to Vail Health's Emergency Department for anxiety and depression rose 465% (from 63 to 350) between 2013 and 2018. Eagle County lost 17 people to suicide in 2018, up 183% from 2016.

"All of the sudden, behavioral health was recognized as a raging wildfire," says Michael Holton, vice president of marketing and communications at Vail Health. "People started identifying it as a local crisis, and community groups came together to better understand the issues and find solutions."

In 2017, a new tax to support mental health on recreational marijuana sales and growth operations passed by 75% of votes. Both residents and community leaders began to pay more attention to the lack of resources Eagle County and other mountain and rural towns face when it comes to mental health.

Community groups including Eagle County Paramedic Services, Eagle County Schools, Mountain Youth (formerly Eagle River Youth Coalition), Hope Center, Mind Springs Health, Mountain Family Health, SpeakUp ReachOut, University of Colorado's Depression Center and local police departments joined Vail Health and Eagle County to identify gaps in service and determine next steps.

In January 2018, tax revenue began to stream into the Behavioral Health Initiative Fund. Eagle County contributed \$1.3 million to the cause, and Vail Health came forward with a \$60 million commitment over the next 10 years. Vail Health also created the unaffiliated nonprofit, Eagle Valley Behavioral Health, to lead the initiative and direct the Behavioral Health Initiative Fund. Its goals are to improve access to therapists, resources and programs; decrease the stigma of mental illness; collaborate with local and regional entities devoted to behavioral health; and build a cross-functional behavioral health facility, which includes psychiatric hospitalization.

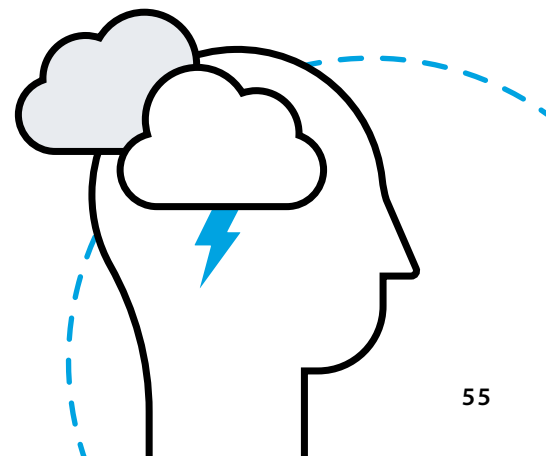
The nonprofit works to increase awareness and resources — including the planned crisis center — and collaborate with and amplify other nonprofits' efforts, such as SpeakUp ReachOut's suicide prevention trainings, education and "You Are Not Alone" messages.

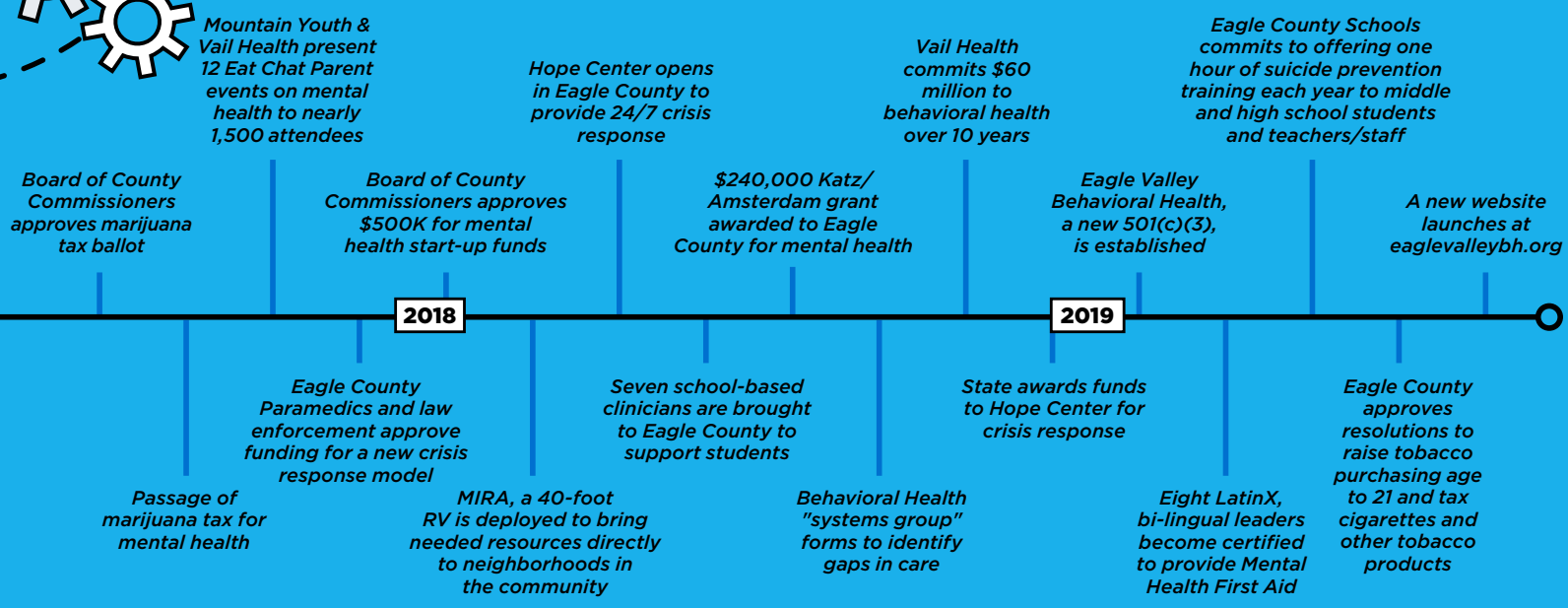
Eagle Valley Behavioral Health aims to stimulate open conversations through efforts like Mountain Youth's Eat Chat Parent speaker series, which attracted nearly 1,500 attendees last year — 10 times the amount of past participants — after Vail Health ran print and social media ads.



▲ Gerry Lopez didn't particularly like running until he joined his school's cross country team. He found his passion, as well as a community of people who cared about him and challenged him to pursue his goals. Running with his teammates helped him overcome a sense of loneliness that caused depression. Today, he is a distance runner and the youth engagement coordinator for Eagle Valley Behavioral Health. PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE TAYLOR

"Communitywide, the nonprofit aims to ensure open conversations, hold partners accountable and always ensure that the patient's needs are our number one priority," Lindley says. "While we all come to the table with different hats, we are collectively working for the same mission, and that is to transform the Eagle River Valley's behavioral health system."





"GIVEN ALL THE GREAT THINGS WE'VE ACCOMPLISHED IN ONLY THE LAST TWO YEARS, THE FUTURE OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IN THE EAGLE RIVER VALLEY IS BRIGHT." - CHRIS LINDLEY

"We have buy-in from every major stakeholder in the county, from the top level. The boat's going to start moving because we're all rowing in the same direction," says Michelle Meuthing, executive director of Hope Center, an organization dedicated to bringing mental health services to people in crisis. "What is taking place in Eagle County is unlike any initiative I've seen anywhere. This initiative is really going to make a mark on Colorado, and if it's successful, it will become a model for other communities."

IMMEDIATE INTERVENTIONS

Eagle County Paramedic Services filled a large gap in behavioral health services by giving the Hope Center seed money to open a satellite office in Eagle County in September 2018. Hope Center has been working in the Roaring Fork Valley for nine years. Its clinicians specialize in managing crises, such as suicidal ideation. Clinicians accompany police or paramedics responding to crisis calls. They help calm people in crisis, establish a safety plan, link them to therapeutic resources and follow up days later. Most of the time, they prevent hospitalization through such intervention.

"It decreases the trauma on the patients themselves by having a good home plan to follow," explains Greg Daly, Chief of Police at the Avon Police Department.

Before Hope Center came to Eagle County, paramedics usually took people to the Emergency Department for evaluation, or police officers took them into protective custody, which meant handcuffing and holding them at the station.

"They're not criminals, and we shouldn't be treating them as such," Daly says.

Once in the station, they would wait until a mental health clinician could arrive and evaluate them, unless they were under the influence of alcohol, in which case an officer had to sit with them until they sobered up. If the clinician decided they posed a safety issue, an ambulance ushered them to the Emergency Department.

Within seven months of Hope Center's interventions, ambulance transportations to the Emergency Department decreased by 76%.

"The last thing a patient needs is five bills," says Chris Montera, CEO of Eagle County Paramedics. "Now we save them money by treating them in their environment and helping them maintain status in their community instead of going into the hospital."

In addition to its crisis work, Hope Center has added nine clinicians to Eagle County Schools, with a goal to staff all 17 schools with clinicians. They identify the highest risk kids and provide therapy in the hopes of preventing future crises.

OTHER SOLUTIONS

In 2018, Vail Health purchased land for a cross-functional behavioral health facility. Construction is planned for 2020.

The center will provide crisis stabilization, detox, respite care and a walk-in clinic, open 24/7. It will alleviate the intense stress of driving (or an ambulance ride) to Denver or Grand Junction when people need hospitalization.

"The vision is: No matter what your issue is, you can go there and you can get help — whether you can't sleep or you're suicidal or you can't get the hamster wheel to stop," Lindley says.

Eagle Valley Behavioral Health will hire outside professionals to provide care and run the facility.

A COMMUNITY EFFORT

Eagle Valley Behavioral Health isn't just going to build a cross-functional behavioral health facility; the intention is to transform the entire behavioral health landscape, from

▼ The Eagle Valley Behavioral Health Advisory Group is comprised of community leaders who are critical to the initiative. PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE TAYLOR



ending social stigmas to fostering strong support systems.

“Now there is a positive wave in relationship to changing the paradigm from very, very, very under-resourced to being a model community for the nation,” Daly says.

Eagle County representatives have been meeting with other mountain town nonprofits to share solutions. Eagle Valley Behavioral Health has built a website at www.eaglevalleybh.org to offer a provider directory and other resources. Community leaders are also researching ways to attract therapists to the valley and help people pay for services, perhaps through vouchers or sliding scales, Lindley says. In addition, he and his team are placing a priority on addressing the unique needs of the LatinX populations in the community.

“Given all the great things we’ve accomplished in only the last two years, the future of behavioral health in the Eagle River Valley is bright,” says Lindley.

As other mountain communities struggle with similar issues, Eagle Valley Behavioral Health hopes to share its ideas and vision. “The Eagle River Valley is poised to become a leader in the conversation because it has the resources — it has unity and collaboration, a plan, the funding and

a backbone organization to lead it,” Holton says.

But community leaders and nonprofits can’t change everything by themselves; they need locals to participate by attending educational events and forums and by bringing the topic of mental health into everyday conversations.

“I’m seeing a reduction in the stigma with the different efforts, but it’s not a process that will end,” Lopez says. “(It’s like) this is Day One, and people need to wake up every single day, because the stigma is decreasing, but we need to minimize it so much more.”

Equating behavioral health problems with physical injuries and illnesses helps normalize the issues — and the people who suffer with depression, anxiety, substance abuse and other mental health issues. Eagle Valley Behavioral Health opens up healing opportunities for everyone to come together, learn and give and receive support.

“I want people in Eagle County to know there’s hope,” Lopez says. “All they have to do is open up.”

“We have all recognized the behavioral health shortcomings in this community,” Lindley says, “and we all know we can do better, and we will. It takes a valley.” ▼

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EAGLE VALLEY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH’S WEBSITE IS A HUB OF RESOURCES, INCLUDING A PROVIDER DIRECTORY. VISIT EAGLEVALLEYBH.ORG FOR MORE INFORMATION.

