MONTANA’S MENTAL HEALTH

By NORTH VALLEY HOSPITAL.

In a stunningly beautiful place that offers seemingly limitless recreational opportunities, high levels of education, happy residents and even happier tourists, Montana is rarely thought of as having a dark side.

Rarely do we talk about a troubling statistic that continues to plague Montana. This state consistently has one of the highest suicide rates nationwide. At nearly double the national average, this statistic is severely troubling.

Despite the outward appearance that Montana has opportunity and happiness stacked in its favor, North Valley Hospital’s new medical director in its Behavioral Health Department, Dr. J. Douglas Muir, is working to help combat those staggering numbers and help those struggling with mental illness.

Dr. Muir understands the varied reasons for why Montana has such high rates of suicide and a high percentage of people who suffer from mental illness. There is a significant stigma attached to a variety of skewed stereotypes and assumptions about mental illness and subsequent care. Often, mental illness isn’t considered a regular disease. There are also significant shortages in mental health providers (including psychiatrists and therapists) statewide.

Tall and outdoorsy, Dr. Muir is clearly dedicated to his practice and aims to provide professional help to children through senior adults, with a focus on children and adolescence. He was led to North Valley Hospital in Whitefish, where he calls this a “dream job in a dream place.”

Earning his undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate residency and fellowships in Arkansas, he most recently professionally practiced in Cheyenne, Wyoming for three years before transferring to North Valley Hospital. He is board-certified in Psychiatry as well as Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and a member of the American Psychiatric Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Dr. Muir knows his job is tough and the road ahead is daunting, but he is determined to help the under-served sector of people suffering from mental illness in this area. Most rural areas (as most of Montana qualifies as) are under-served in available psychiatrists and medical professionals equipped to handle mental illness, especially in children.

“Kids are my passion and the earlier that there are interventions to address mental illness, the stronger likelihood there is for a better outcome,” Dr. Muir says. He practices and encourages a holistic and collaborative care approach. He often works with schools, teachers, caregivers, therapists and anyone inside the child’s nucleus to gain more and a better insight into what the child is battling.

“My practice is a multi-faceted approach. No one exists in a vacuum and it is important to look at the entire picture when evaluating and treating people. Solutions vary - sometimes medication may be appropriate, but in other instances it is not. I’m also a huge proponent of exercise. And what better place to practice than here.” he says.

His office is decorated with varying types of children toys that are hard not to notice, even for adults. Dr. Muir explains that the toys act as an immediate icebreaker for the child, which ideally is the gateway to building trust and a successful therapeutic alliance with the patient.

“Trust is key and if the children can let loose, play with toys and open up to me, that’s a win,” Dr. Muir says.

Parents of children perhaps struggling with a mental illness, or experiencing a difficult life-phase, may not feel comfortable with the idea that outside, professional help is needed. But he encourages parents to look past this.

Children aren’t able to verbally express themselves as effectively as adults can and often find other ways to express themselves. Children can express their frustrations by acting out, showing aggression, increased irritability, a change and drop in school performance, or basically just not acting as their normal selves. All are possible indicators that mentally, the child is struggling.

It’s an important issue that North Valley Hospital recognizes and wants to supply the services to the significant and obvious need in this area. With an already busy appointment schedule, Dr. Muir isn’t backing down to the challenge and is accepting new appointments.

For more information visit www.nvbehavioralhealth.org or 406-862-1030.

Dr. J. Douglas Muir is board-certified in Psychiatry and Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. He is the Medical Director at North Valley Hospital’s Behavioral Health and North Valley Embrace Health in Whitefish. North Valley Behavioral Health’s goal is to restore one’s mental health to an optimal level and to help alleviate any symptoms that may be affecting the quality of life, satisfaction and ability to function. For more information go to www.nvbehavioralhealth.org.