Center announces suicide prevention as new site’s mission

As they looked for a new Los Angeles location for an expanded Suicide Prevention Center, leaders at Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services vowed they would not enter a new area quietly.

“We had a list of criteria for a building, and first we wanted to be on a highly traveled street,” Didi Hirsch President and CEO Kita Curry, Ph.D., told MHW. “We’re committed as an agency to erase the stigma associated with mental illness in general.”

Therefore, when Didi Hirsch formally unveiled the Suicide Prevention Center’s new location adjacent to Center City earlier this month, the dedication showcased a monument sign on the property declaring the facility’s full name and purpose. Curry says she has never seen another building in the country where suicide prevention is so prominently advertised.

“When this was unveiled, it was very emotional,” she says of the Feb. 7 launch and dedication. “People were driving by tooting their horns.”

Didi Hirsch’s history with suicide prevention initiatives dates back to the 1950s, when the Suicide Prevention Center was established as a response to what two Los Angeles psychologists were seeing with suicide’s effects on the military veteran population. While the new location does not mark the launch of a new program, it does represent a milestone in that all of the services and support in the building are dedicated specifically to suicide prevention. There is no shared space with other mental health functions, as had been the case in the past.

Available services

The new building, with more than 14,000 square feet of space, houses services that range from individual and family therapy to a crisis support line. Didi Hirsch is a leading member of the 24/7 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network (800-273-8255), and one of the mental health organization’s other core roles has involved training of numerous community stakeholders, from business leaders to faith leaders to first responders.

“Our community can be the safety net if they know the warning signs,” Curry said.

Didi Hirsch also has been very involved in training therapists across the country, Curry said. “Fifteen hundred organizations have requested our model curriculum,” she said.

The Suicide Prevention Center’s groups include those for individuals who have survived a suicide attempt and those who have lost a loved one to suicide. New initiatives from the center include support groups for teens grieving a loss to suicide.

Location considerations

Besides wanting to locate in a high-traffic area, leaders at Didi Hirsch had mapped out where its staff and volunteers lived, in order to try to come up with an optimally convenient site. Many staffers work part-time, and in a 24/7 operation it is not unusual for 250 workers to be in the building at various points in a typical day. “This is draining work,” Curry said.

Some of the buildings the organization considered would have required major seismic improvements or other upgrades, while others lacked windows and would not have offered an uplifting work environment. The location that leaders found “is truly filled with light and hope,” Curry said. “Our crisis-line workers are bathed in light.”

The building’s interior also features a public art installation that was underwritten by Didi Hirsch Board Vice Chair Pamela Kluft, who lost a sister to suicide. Activist and artist Ed Massey worked with survivors of suicide loss or attempt to paint an artwork that hangs near the building’s north entrance.

“It is about hope,” Curry said. “Hopelessness is a primary feeling associated with suicide.”

Curry said she sees numerous strides in awareness about suicide. Rarely is published a media report about suicide that does not include helpline information. A new Califor-