

Health care outreach attempts to reach community

By S. J. Black

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Mendonoma Health Alliance held its first public forum to a small turnout of five non-affiliated residents Tuesday at the Gualala Community Center.

The forums are intended to educate local residents about MHA and to educate MHA about the key health care concerns of its community.

MHA is a rural health network formed by three healthcare organizations — Coast Life Support

District and Redwood Coast Medical Services in Gualala, and St. Joseph's Health System in Santa Rosa — and launched last year.

The Alliance acts as a mediator between the three health care affiliates to provide Mendonoma coast residents better access to health care, said Claire Freson, MHA Network Coordinator.

After several months of strategic planning, MHA has begun to host community forums as part of the conditions of a grant from the federal

Health Resources and Services Administration.

"We're still open to what the community has to say," said Bonnie Noble, MHA network director. Finding ways to reach out to the community has been a struggle for MHA, she said. "We haven't been as successful ... as we've wanted to be."

Health care has been an issue for rural Mendocino and Sonoma coast residents. After previous urgent care services were discontinued in 2009 the community has grappled with the problem, looking at various proposals from a reconstituted urgent care to a small hospital to an ambulatory clinic with visiting specialists.

Since the passage of Measure J in 2014, RCMSagain provides urgent care from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays and on-call for the same hours on weekends, but finding primary care doctors and getting appointments is a struggle for residents.

"It can take weeks [to

see a doctor]," said Ellen Murphy, Sea Ranch resident. Her concerns were cost and availability.

"You don't want to think about [healthcare issues] if you don't need them," said Don Kemp, RCMS treasurer. He asked two public members, recently moved only three weeks ago from North Carolina, how important accessible health care is to moving to the area.

"Is [health care access] an issue?" Kemp asked Pat and Sandy Friedman.

"I think that it should be an issue," said Pat Friedman. "Good access to medical care is important for everyone ... not just to new people but to the existing community."

Chronic health problems are a huge reason people decide to leave the area, said Kemp. Driving hours to and from the doctor for regular visits, "gets old pretty fast," he said.

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MHA hopes to do health education as well.

Health education is a necessity, said David Caley, CSLD district administrator. "A challenge for our community is really making these resources that are available well known and well utilized."

Some ideas were thrown around that could be useful to the community: telemedicine and telepharmacy for chronic disease patients, recruiting more medical specialists and expanding urgent care.

But as of yet, MHA is finishing up its strategic

planning sessions and settling its governing board. Plans for community outreach are in their infancy for a community grappling to meet the most basic of health care provisions.

"Social determinants ... have a tremendous impact on us," said Noble. Adding to the host of affiliates, MHA is trying to work with Action Network to reach out to marginalized groups and youth.

Substance abuse in the local community is an elephant in the room, said Noble. "It's a huge part of who we are as a community — drugs and alcohol."

Noble wants to include these issues in the MHA outreach programs. As of now, no such events are scheduled to take place.

MHA has a survey available in English at www.surveymonkey.com/r/MHA_CHNA_2017 and in Spanish at www.surveymonkey.com/r/MHA_CHNA_Espanol.

The results from the surveys will tell MHA if what it's doing meets the needs of the community it serves, said Noble.

The next community forum will be held at the Coast Community Library in Point Arena on Sunday, April 9, from 2 to 4 p.m.