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Substance abuse clinical care realigns to Army Medicine

By Jeff Troth, MEDDAC PAO

A change has arrived at Fort Carson for those seeking assistance with alcohol or drug abuse. They will see the same counselors, but those counselors will be in different offices on the Mountain Post.

“In 2015, the secretary of the Army took a close look at substance abuse care in the Army and decided to move it under the Army’s Medical Command,” said Lt. Col. David Yeaw, chief of the Department of Behavioral Health at Evans Army Community Hospital. “He and other Army senior leaders felt that we (MEDCOM) could provide really good substance abuse clinical care within behavioral health services.”

This realignment moves the Substance Use Disorder Clinical Care treatment into the medical realm, while Installation Management Command retains responsibility of the Army Substance Abuse Program drug testing and deterrence, alcohol and drug abuse prevention training, and the ASAP training curriculum.

“The prevention and testing parts of substance abuse has always been a command and a garrison kind of mission and MEDCOM’s role is clinical care,” Yeaw said. “So it makes a lot of sense that the program is split up and we do what we do best, clinical care delivery.”

To help with the integration and to ensure a seamless transition for patients to SUDCC the U.S. Army Medical Department Activity – Fort Carson hired the ASAP counselors that were working for garrison.

“For those already receiving counseling, they will continue to get the same great care from the same excellent counselors, just in a different location,” said U.S. Public Health Service Lt. Commander Jessica Schultz, Evans’ deputy chief for the Department of Behavior Health. “We have four main locations where these counselors will be working.”

For those seeking substance abuse assistance their first stop now is the new Behavioral Health Addiction Medicine office in building 1056 (next to the old SRP site) on O'Connell Boulevard. The staff there will "triage" the patients to figure out what treatment plan will work best for them – group or 1-on-1. The counseling sessions will take place in either building 1056, the Mountain Post Behavioral Health Clinic (on Specker Road), or at an embedded behavioral health clinics.

"Behavioral health has many different services that are all integrated, intensive out-patient, in-patient and embedded behavioral health teams, so adding the substance abuse component makes sense," Yeaw said.

Currently, 30 percent of Soldiers with a behavioral health condition screen positive for substance use disorder, and 50 percent with suicidal ideation screen positive for excessive alcohol use. The realigning of the ASAP clinical components under MEDCOM will help the Army to maximize integration and coordination of care between substance use disorder treatment and other forms of mental health care.

"At Fort Carson we have had a great track record working with the substance abuse counselors for years," said Schultz. "We had weekly meetings with the ASAP supervisor and case manager where we collaborated in getting the best clinical care for their patients. This realignment is just going to build on the care we have provided in the past."

Besides the change in location, Schultz said there is another change coming for those seeking help for substance abuse. MEDCOM is drafting a new Army regulation detailing substance use disorder clinical care as well as addressing the role of commanders in referral, rehabilitation and treatment.

"The new regulation should give substance abuse patients the same confidentiality that behavioral health patients have," said Schultz. "Currently for a Soldier to enroll in ASAP their command has to fill out a form. So, that commander knows if his or her Soldier is in ASAP, no matter the severity of the Soldier's case."

For behavioral health patients a commander doesn't know if someone is being seen for marital issues, depression or sleep problems, until it reaches the threshold where the Soldier's ability to perform their job is impacted.

“Behavioral health has proven that we can provide good continuity of care to our Soldiers, Family members and Army civilians,” said Yeaw. “Having the substance abuse counselors with us allows us to do even more for Fort Carson.”

For those needing assistance with a substance use disorder, call Behavioral Health Addiction Medicine at 526-2862.



Catherine Ocasio, a substance abuse counselor, talks with a patient. (Photo by Jeff Troth)