

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE ISSUE OF MENTAL HEALTH

As 2021 comes to a close, I'm finding it hard to believe that the pandemic still looms large in our country. Predictions abound that January will be challenging, thanks to the Omicron variant and some less-than-cautious behavior during the holidays.

Still, what looms large in my mind is not coronavirus but our country's mental health. It's been a tough year (nearly two). And the holiday season has its way of making a bad situation worse.

Along with the usual stressors — lack of time, financial pressures, family dynamics — some of us are worried about our health this year, or the health of loved ones. Or we feel sad about holiday plans gone awry. The stress can lead to physical illness, depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

There's no question, however: America's mental health crisis began long before the pandemic. But the struggle is greater today. It's touching just about everyone.

So, kudos to the athletes who gave a voice — and a face — to the

issue of mental health this year.

In May, tennis superstar Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open, citing concerns about her mental well-being. Osaka, the world's highest-paid female athlete, sparred with tournament officials over her media obligations. After she was fined \$15,000 for skipping a news conference, Osaka made a public admission about her struggle with depression and anxiety. It began with her victory over Serena Williams, the crowd favorite, at the 2018 U.S. Open.

In an Instagram post, Osaka said, "I think now the best thing for the tournament, the other players and my well-being is that I withdraw so that everyone can get back to focusing on the tennis going on in Paris."

Osaka's action was unprecedented in professional tennis. She walked away from a high-profile event mid-tournament, for a reason other than a physical injury. Popular and social media quickly ignited, with an outpouring of

both praise and scorn for Osaka from around the globe.

Then in July, gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from the Tokyo Olympics, where she had been favored to win five gold medals. Biles collected a silver medal in the team competition and a bronze for the balance beam before announcing her struggle with "the twisties," a frightening mental hiccup that can cause a gymnast to lose track of where they are while in midair.

Not only was Biles dealing with the pressures of being a high-profile athlete on a high-profile stage, she was still grappling with the aftereffects of yearslong sexual abuse by her former USA Gymnastics doctor. In September, Biles appeared in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee to testify about the abuse.

Through it all, Biles showed incredible strength, beyond the demands of her sport. Time magazine named Biles its 2021 Athlete of the Year, calling her the greatest gymnast of all time. She was also

hailed for bringing the issue of mental health to the forefront.

Along with Osaka and Biles, other athletes have stepped forward to discuss their own mental health battles. It's triggered an important and overdue shift in the narrative around mental health in sports. Similarly, conversations about mental health are under way in schools and in workplaces around the country, as they look for ways to respond to the negative impacts of the pandemic.

It's progress to be sure, but as a society, we are still uncomfortable with talking about mental health issues. The silence has led to stigma: People with mental illness are often marginalized or discriminated against, due to a lack of understanding or fear (or both). So, it's easy enough to understand why people don't seek treatment for mental illness. They worry about being labeled or treated differently, and the consequences that could have on their lives.

But really, what's the difference between diabetes and depression?

We don't think less of a person because they're diabetic; why would we think less of a person who's depressed?

With so many people struggling, it's time to treat matters of physical and mental health with equal importance. After all, they are two halves of a whole person. We must begin to talk about mental health out in the open, without judgment — and without worry, if you're the person who's suffering.

Osaka and Biles were courageous in their outspokenness. Let's step up our own game. It could turn out to be the best outcome of this pandemic.

If you're in need of mental health resources — for you, a family member, or friend — contact 2-1-1 San Diego (211sandiego.org).

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncronline.com.



JOHN GASTALDO

Jessie Angeles (right), with PATH San Diego, checks on Martin Pascua in City Heights, reminding him of an upcoming appointment. The city and county of San Diego are working together on new programs for the new year, and hundreds of affordable housing units soon will become available for those on the street or in shelters.

HELP • Annual count may show increase in numbers of homeless

FROM B1

housing project in East Village, and all rooms are expected to be occupied by March.

Wakeland Housing & Development Corporation, which operates two affordable housing projects for formerly homeless seniors, plans to open a third, the 52-unit Ivy Senior Apartments in Clairemont, next month.

Also in January, the annual countywide homeless point-in-time count is expected to resume after being skipped last January because of the pandemic. It's unclear whether the homeless population has increased, but there is reason to believe it has.

Last April, the Regional Task Force on Homelessness released a report that found the number of people who became homeless for the first time more than doubled in 2020, possibly because of the pandemic. The Homeless Crisis Response System report found the number of first-time homeless people in the county increased from 2,326 in 2019 to 4,152 the following year, a 79 percent jump. The previous year saw a 6 percent decrease from 2018.

Within the next few months, two new shelters are expected to open at either end of the county.

The city of Oceanside purchased a former school

building with plans to open a 50-bed shelter and has selected the San Diego Rescue Mission to run it.

In National City, the Rescue Mission has purchased another school building that had been used by a church, and the nonprofit recently gained approval to convert it into a 160-bed shelter. Neither that city nor Oceanside has had a year-round shelter.

More shelter beds also are coming to Escondido, where Interfaith Community Services has operated the 49-bed Haven House as North County's only shelter. Interfaith CEO Greg Anglea said plans are under way to convert the Hawthorne Vet-

eran and Family Resource Center on North Ash Street into a shelter that will serve 10 to 14 families.

The nonprofit also is expected to soon complete the Abraham and Lillian Turk Recuperative Care Center in Escondido, which will provide 54 beds for homeless people who have been discharged from hospitals but still have some healing ahead of them.

In Chula Vista, the City Council recently approved a plan to create 66 prefab units that will provide temporary housing to homeless people. The first of its kind in the county, the plan calls for 63 units that have two beds each and three units that

can sleep four for a total capacity of 138.

While nothing is in the works just yet, the Vista City Council in October agreed to ask developers to submit requests for proposals to develop the city's first shelter.

Also on the horizon, the Lucky Duck Foundation has offered a large tented structure it owns to San Diego or any city that would consider using it as a shelter. The tent can hold 250 beds and had been used as a shelter by Veterans Village of San Diego and at one time was offered to Chula Vista to use as a shelter.

The city and county of San Diego recently opened a 50-bed shelter on Sports

Arena Boulevard for homeless people facing addiction and mental illness, and they plan to open in the near future safe havens, longer-term housing for people in recovery.

The county also has increased its outreach efforts to connect more homeless people on the street with services and shelter. Under the new agreement with People Assisting the Homeless, eight PATH outreach workers are in East County, four are in North County, three are in South County and two are in the central and north central region.

gary.warth@sduniontribune.com
Twitter: @GaryWarthUT

SMOLENS • New programs for older citizens to require resources

FROM B1

San Diego City Council approved the city's Age-Friendly San Diego plan, which details goals and policies for the municipal government.

Last month, SDSU announced the school's new Center for Excellence in Aging & Longevity, which aims to build upon its predecessor, the university's Center on Aging. In July, SDSU became an Age-Friendly University, which commits the school to "evaluate its current programs and create interdepartmental and intergenerational plans to best serve older adults and the San Diego region."

The university joined some 80 institutions involved with the Age-Friendly University Global Network and Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education.

SDSU has been working with local governments — including the city and county of San Diego, Chula Vista and La Mesa — to develop programs aimed at assisting older San Diegans.

Whether all this will enable the region to handle the aging population remains to be seen. That will require more resources from local government budgets that often are stretched thin. Finding new revenue is always a challenge and shifting funding from existing programs often runs into resistance.

The city of San Diego's plan maps out areas that will need changes and improvements to accommodate aging residents: outdoor spaces and public buildings; transportation; housing, social and civic participation; respect and social inclusion; and community health and wellness. The county plan covers those same areas.

Many of the proposals strive to help older people remain in their homes as long as they can or desire. To that end, there are practical notions, such as helping residents add ramps at their houses.

The plan was two years in the making, and it noted the city doesn't have a panel focused on aging residents

like other large cities do, according to David Garrick of The San Diego Union-Tribune.

The county has a broader mandate than the city because it oversees health and human services across the county, which makes its Aging Roadmap, launched in 2019, more sweeping. The plan discusses support for caregivers, volunteer opportunities for seniors and outreach efforts to provide food, coordinate social interaction and conduct general welfare check-ins, particularly for people with disabilities.

County officials say there's a built-in flexibility to the programs, which helped them adapt to the coronavirus pandemic. The challenge was at least twofold: shifting some of the services to be handled remotely and helping senior citizens operate more comfortably with virtual interaction.

The county also has a neighborhood evacuation program that has a special focus on assisting senior citizens with special needs

during disasters.

The roadmap has a strong focus on health, particularly regarding dementia. That dovetails with the county's Alzheimer's Project, which was started in 2014 and engages in public education, assistance for those affected and support for researchers seeking cures.

The county has been trying to get ahead of the anticipated increase in dementia cases as the population ages. A key goal is helping to provide support so people with dementia can live as independently as possible and continue to interact with the community.

Beyond government services, there's increased attention on older employees — again, no surprise, given the workforce is aging along with the population and many people continue to work past traditional retirement ages, or want to.

There has long been a concern about older workers being pushed out, or not hired, in favor of younger, less-expensive employees.

On the flip side, certain businesses say they seek to retain and hire older workers because of their experience and reliability.

More than a dozen San Diego businesses have signed the AARP Employer Pledge to promote equal opportunity for all workers, regardless of age. The companies range from Scripps Health to Girl Scouts San Diego to San Diego Grab Bars, which installs hand bars and other amenities that help make homes safer for older people.

In all, more than 1,000 businesses nationwide have signed on, according to AARP, including Marriott International, ACE Hardware and H&R Block.

There's no obligation regarding who to hire, just an agreement that there should be equal opportunity for all workers, regardless of age. Among the requirements is no age discrimination lawsuits within the past five years.

California workers are protected against age discrimination under state and federal law, so while there's a

sense of symbolism to this, it puts businesses on the record as being age-friendly. In return for signing the pledge, businesses essentially get AARP's seal of approval and are able to promote that.

Given there's no reversing the demographic trajectory, a lot is riding on how the policies are implemented and expanded, and how open companies actually are to employing older workers, legalities aside.

The emerging "Silver Tsunami" will have a big impact on society, and government and businesses at least seem to be preparing for that.

Tweet of the Week

Goes to Assemblymember Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher (@LorenaSGonzalez), after former San Diego City Councilmember David Alvarez announced his candidacy for the new district where she would likely run for re-election.

"Dude, I'm not dead."

michael.smolens
@sduniontribune.com