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Pioneering Sierra Vista High Club Spotlights Mental Health Issues

150-member group is first student-led NAMI club in nation

BALDWIN PARK – A Sierra Vista High School student club focused on battling the stigma of mental illness will host a program on child psychology and animal therapy featuring Kaiser Permanente Baldwin Park Medical Center therapy dog “Gunny” at 3 p.m. Monday, Oct. 23.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Club – started as a pilot effort in 2016-17 – is the nation’s first student-led NAMI club and includes more than 150 members. Mental health advocates estimate that one in five children and youths have mental health challenges, but only 20 percent of them receive care.

“This is an extraordinary group of students who are dedicated to raising awareness of the mental health issues that impact our communities, especially young people,” Superintendent Dr. Froilan N. Mendoza said.

The group is advised by two Kaiser Permanente social work interns and Dr. Susan Coats, a Baldwin Park Unified school psychologist on special assignment.

Coats, who helped launch the club, has been honored for the program by U.S. Rep. Grace Napolitano and was recognized by the California Mental Health Advocates for Children and Youth as its 2017 Advocate of the Year.

Coats, who has worked for Baldwin Park Unified for 28 years, also serves as the mental health and crisis consultation chair for the California Association for School Psychologists and as part of the state’s Student Mental Health Policy Workgroup.

“We’re extremely grateful to Dr. Coats and Kaiser Permanente for inspiring and supporting this spirit of civic-minded inquiry,” Mendoza said.

The Oct. 23 event will include Azusa Pacific University Assistant Professor Charity Vasquez, who will talk about her work helping hospitalized youths and families understand diagnoses and integrating back into school after long-term absences.

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Therapy dog handler Elaine Jeché and “Gunny” will discuss how therapy dogs help individuals who may contend with mental health illnesses.

The program is one in a series helping students understand the scope of mental health services. Already, two training sessions with Kaiser Permanente Baldwin Park Medical Center showed students how to identify and understand mental health awareness and how to find services.

In addition to Kaiser Permanente, the group is also assisted by NAMI East San Gabriel Valley, NAMI CA and the California Department of Education.

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