



DIRECTOR'S NEWSLETTER



Dr. Jei Africa

Happy autumn! As we welcome the changing seasons, we also embrace changes in BHRS under the ongoing Transformation Journey. Recent newsletters have highlighted how Prop. 1 has served as a driving force for statewide change. In the face of uncertainties brought by this transition, we know that in order to continue to meet client needs it is crucial to build strong partnerships and infrastructure that emphasize data management, fiscal transparency, quality monitoring and developing and retaining a skilled workforce. BHRS will continue to adapt and meet challenges with innovation and collaboration, while, as always, keeping our clients at the forefront of our work. In this Newsletter, discover how to participate in this transformation journey, learn about new service offerings, and reflect on a youth program we are saying goodbye to after nearly a decade.

Board of Supervisors Holds BHRS Study Session

On September 9, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisor's held a BHRS study session where Director Dr. Jei Africa presented a comprehensive overview of BHRS services, staffing, client demographics and budget. A key theme of the presentation was how BHRS is navigating state and federal changes to fulfil its responsibility as a Behavioral Health Plan that provides specialty mental health and substance use disorder treatment services for Medi-Cal beneficiaries. Dr. Africa presented data on the 14,396 clients served in Fiscal Year 2024-25, BHRS' \$377M budget, and service utilization for programs including Full-Service Partnership, Cordilleras Mental Health Rehabilitation Centers, Substance Use Disorders and eating disorder treatment. During public comment, several Ambassadors from the Health Ambassadors Program (HAP), pictured with the BHRS Executive Team, shared their lived experiences and the impact BHRS services have had on their personal lives, family and community. A recording is available online, with the BHRS presentation starting at 4 hours and 35 minutes and lasting about an hour. Afterward, Courtney Sage, Director of Behavioral Health at Health Plan of San Mateo (HPSM), discussed non-specialty mental health services for HPSM members.



Sitike Counseling Center Launches DUI Multiple Offender Program

Sitike Counseling Center (“Sitike”) is pleased to announce the launch of our new Driving Under the-Influence (DUI) Multiple Offender Program, expanding our services to better meet the needs of individuals and the broader community. The Multiple Offender Program is designed for participants with more than one DUI offense, providing structured education, accountability, and counseling to reduce the risk of repeat offenses. By combining evidence-based practices with compassionate support, the program promotes responsible decision-making, long-term recovery, and community safety.

Key program elements include:

- Specialized curriculum addressing the risks and consequences of impaired driving.
- Group counseling and education sessions focused on accountability, responsibility, and relapse prevention.
- Individualized planning to support personal growth and reduce barriers to change.
- Community collaboration with courts, probation, and local agencies to ensure compliance and positive outcomes.

“For over 37 years, Sitike has provided trusted counseling and recovery services in San Mateo County,” said Executive Director, Keri Kirby. “The Multiple Offender DUI Program is another way we are responding to community needs, supporting participants in making lasting changes, and enhancing public safety.”

Enrollment for the DUI Multiple Offender Program is now open. For more information, please contact Sitike Counseling Center at info@sitike.org or (650) 589-9305.



Susan Naify Honored with 2025 David Lewis Award

On September 3, Susan Naify of Sitike Counseling Center received the 2025 David Lewis Award for her significant contributions to substance abuse recovery. The award honors David Lewis, a long-term employee of San Mateo County Health and co-founder of substance abuse treatment and prevention agency Free at Last in East Palo Alto. Susan’s professional, empathetic and deeply human approach to client care makes her stand out at Sitike Counseling Center. She teaches her colleagues that in this field of service, the language of the heart is the most powerful tool when helping clients navigate recovery. Susan helps clients through the stages of change and creates a safe space for them to explore the underlying issues that may be driving their substance use disorder. In an age of intense physical and electronic record keeping, Susan remains client focused, meeting each person right where they are on their journey and extending a loving, compassionate hand of guidance.



Reflecting on a Decade of the Health Ambassador Program for Youth

Since its launch in Fall 2016, the Health Ambassador Program for Youth (HAP-Y) has been transforming the way young people in San Mateo County understand, talk about, and lead in the field of behavioral health. What began as a vision to empower youth with tools and knowledge to support themselves and their peers has grown into a powerful community of more than 300 trained ambassadors.

Over the course of 14 weeks of training, HAP-Y participants gain skills in psychoeducation, suicide prevention, healthy coping, healthy relationships, and storytelling. The program culminates in the Photovoice workshop, a unique opportunity for youth to share their lived experiences through photography and narrative. Year after year, participants describe this workshop as their favorite. One participant shared, “Photovoice is magical... It’s really incredible how emotions can be so clearly conveyed through a few words from a nervous youth.” HAP-Y has not only been an educational program—it has been a career pathway and inspiration. Many ambassadors have gone on to pursue studies and careers in behavioral health, with alumni now working as clinicians or working toward their licensure.



Like many community programs, HAP-Y faced a turning point during the pandemic. Originally designed for in-person meetings, the program quickly adapted to an all-virtual format to ensure that young people could continue to access support and training during a critical time. Recently, HAP-Y has thrived under a hybrid model: 12 weeks of virtual workshops followed by 2 weeks of in-person sessions, striking a balance between flexibility and the meaningful connections built face-to-face.

As we celebrate nearly a decade of HAP-Y, we honor not only the 300+ youth who have graduated from the program but also the powerful ripple effect they have created. Through community events, school presentations and social media campaigns, HAP-Y Ambassadors have engaged more than 10,000 community members across San Mateo County—building awareness, breaking stigma, and strengthening the mental health of their communities. Beyond education, ambassadors have stepped into leadership and advocacy roles, shaping the conversation around behavioral health and wellness.

This August, HAP-Y celebrated the graduation of its 26th and final cohort—17 youth ages 16–24 from San Mateo County. The evening included dinner, an icebreaker, and our signature StoryCircle, where ambassadors shared their Photovoice projects. Peers offered supportive feedback, creating a powerful reminder of the importance of storytelling to build connection, healing and community.

Reflecting on a Decade of the Health Ambassador Program for Youth Cont.

The Health Ambassador Program for Youth was inspired by the Health Ambassador Program originally designed for adults. HAP-Y first received funding in 2016 through the Mental Health Service Act (MHSA). HAP-Ys first 3 years were essential in determining whether programming would continue past its three year pilot. Nearly a decade later, HAP-Y has been successful in obtaining its goal of encouraging youth in SMC to be active advocates for behavioral health. With the recent closure of StarVista and MHSA funding ending in 2026, the HAP-Y program has come to a close.

For now, we celebrate the achievements of the ambassadors—both through HAP-Y and through their own personal journeys. And as the program comes to its end, one thing remains constant: the belief that when youth are given the knowledge, skills, and platform to lead, they can transform the future of behavioral health in San Mateo County and beyond.

By Brenda Nuñez, HAP-Y Program Manager



Join the NAMI Walk

Join BHRS on Saturday October 4 from 9am - 1pm for the NAMI Walk at Seal Point Park, San Mateo! NAMI has an important mission that is aligned with BHRS – to enhance the quality of life for individuals and families affected by mental illness and help others understand mental illness. At the [link here](#), you can individually donate and share the BHRS team link with your network to raise funds. The event is free to attend and no matter how you are able to participate, you'll contribute to increasing mental health awareness.



BHRS Transformation Journey – We Want to Hear from You!

BHRS is continuing its Transformation Journey and is seeking to engage with the communities we serve by launching a short pulse survey. The survey aims to understand awareness and perceptions of the transformation and preferences for receiving updates and providing feedback. Survey results will help us to better tailor our communications effectively. Please take 10 minutes today to complete this anonymous survey. Your feedback is appreciated and critical to the success of this transformation!