

## **Zonta Club Participates in Lee County Forum on Mental Health Crisis**

**By Darla Letourneau**

On Sunday, members of the Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva attended a community forum in Fort Myers on the mental health crisis in Lee County. The forum was co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters, the SW Florida Addiction Services (SWFAS); the Salvation Army; and Lee Mental Health and the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI). These service providers, in partnership with the Lee County Commission and law enforcement agencies, are requesting state legislators to provide more funding to SW Florida for these services. The proposed first step is a \$3.6 million mental health triage center which will provide law enforcement a 24/7 place they can drop off persons in need of mental health or substance abuse services, sometimes as an alternative to incarceration.

The forum opened a much needed dialogue about the serious lack of these services in our community. Lee County Commissioner, Bob Janes, opened the forum, and outlined the grim facts, including:

- One in four Americans is impacted by mental illness or substance abuse.
- Florida ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation in per capita mental health funding, and its investment in addiction services is only slightly better.
- The Lee Memorial Hospital system has no inpatient hospital mental health beds.
- The largest mental health treatment facility in Lee County is the jail.

The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva has partnered with SWFAS for the past six years, and we have seen first-hand its effectiveness in assisting addicts to become productive citizens. With the support of a generous community, we have augmented SWFAS' efforts with grants as well as advocacy and hands-on assistance. However, major resource investments are needed from the State and local government so that SWFAS and other service providers can meet the growing needs.

Our island is not immune to mental health and substance abuse problems, and we are directly impacted if services are not available in Lee County. In the past few days, I have been contacted by local residents who tell me their stories and want to know what they can do to help. It is time for action by our elected officials, especially at the State level, to address these long-neglected needs.

Here are several immediate things you can do to make your voice heard:

- Write a letter to the editor of News-Press about the need for these services. ([mailbag@news-press.com](mailto:mailbag@news-press.com))
- Go online to: [www.news-press.com](http://www.news-press.com) and participate in the Readers' Forum: "Does Lee County need a mental health triage center?"
- Write our elected representatives at the state and local level, urging them to adequately fund these services.

- Contact Lee Memorial Hospital system officials, telling them that they have a responsibility to this community to provide inpatient mental health hospital beds.
- Contact Ann Arnall at the Lee County Department of Human Services (533-7920, or [arnallam@leegov.com](mailto:arnallam@leegov.com)).
- Contact Liz Givens at the National Alliance for Mental Illness (278-0981, or [namilee@rccbhc.org](mailto:namilee@rccbhc.org)).

The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva is a service organization of professional women working together to provide hands-on assistance, advocacy, and the funds to strengthen women's lives on the islands, in Lee County, and around the world through Zonta International. Additional information about Zonta is available at [www.zontasancap.com](http://www.zontasancap.com).