

METRO

MENTAL

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line staffers have noticed between now and the early pandemic is how many callers are seeking grief support over loved ones lost to the virus.

The line is open 24/7. She said the counselors are trained to listen, empathize and provide some coping strategies that callers can take with them into the future. They can also refer callers to a crisis line or direct them toward substance abuse resources as needed.

The state also offers a text line for people who would prefer not to call, which Battle said she hopes will help the counselors reach more teens.

Since the state opened the hotline in March 2020, counselors have answered more than 20,000 calls.

"We're so grateful that we've been here for all those people," said Battle. "But it's also just devastating that we're still struggling through this crisis, and still having this many people feeling scared and anxious."

Pandemic holiday

Many people were looking forward to seeing family and friends in person this holiday season after a difficult year. For others, the holidays are a challenging time for their mental health, even in the best of circumstances.

"There are added pressures, there's travel, and then the isolation that a lot of people feel especially when they are alone at the holidays," said Greg Hansch, the executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Texas.

Now, on top of all those heightened emotions, Texans are also having to navigate questions of how they can keep themselves and their loved ones safe and healthy. Many may find themselves spending Christmas in quarantine if they test positive for the virus, or awaiting news about family members.

And with so many people potentially getting infected by omicron, Hansch worries about the way shame and stigma may exacerbate the mental health impacts of a COVID-19 diagnosis.

"There's still a perception that if you contract COVID-19, you did something wrong," he said. "For some segment of people who get it, they did everything they were supposed to do. Perhaps they gave themselves a little bit of latitude to socialize so that they didn't have to feel isolated. They shouldn't have to feel stigma about that."

The emergence of omicron is particularly devastating to many who hoped the pandemic was beginning to wind down, with vaccines widely available and many schools and of-

Help available

For mental health support related to COVID-19, call the state's 24/7 toll-free support line at 833-986-1919 or text "COVID" to 832-479-2135. You can also reach a trained crisis counselor through the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline by calling 800-273-8255 or texting 741741.

ices reopening. As the state prepares for a second COVID-19 Christmas and a third year of the pandemic, Battle said, the support line has received an increased number of calls from people who report feeling frustrated, tired or exhausted.

State of mental health

Providers and experts say the mental health impacts of COVID-19 will be felt for years to come,

much like in communities that experience natural disasters or wars. And this latest wave of cases and concerns will only serve to exacerbate those long-term effects.

"Chronic stress is worse than short-term stress," said Andy Keller, the president and CEO of the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute. "We all have a level of resilience, and we all have breaking points. And the longer that things go, the worse it's going to be."

Nationally, depression and anxiety rates have skyrocketed during the pandemic, though they'd begun to decrease in recent months. Deaths from drug overdoses also soared, as did youth suicide attempts.

One bright spot for mental health access has been the increased use of telehealth services. People living in rural areas that are underserved by in-person

mental health providers are now able to access virtual sessions, and so are people who would otherwise need child care or to take time off work to travel to an office.

But broadly, access to mental health care remains a challenge in Texas.

"There quite simply aren't enough mental health providers in the state to meet the need, even if a person has insurance that is willing to cover their services or the person is willing to pay out of pocket," Hansch said. "That is a deeply troubling reality."

Nearly 1 in 5 Texans do not have health insurance, the highest rate in the country. Hansch said it's extremely difficult for uninsured people to access any kind of ongoing mental health care.

The state does offer immediate care to anyone facing a mental health crisis if

they fear they may be a danger to themselves or others. Every county is served by a local mental or behavioral health authority that provides crisis intervention services, which can be accessed 24/7.

In addition to the COVID-19 mental health support line, the Harris Center for Mental Health operates crisis lines serving the Houston area. Battle is encouraging anyone and everyone to reach out this holiday season. She said if you call, day or night, even on Christmas, there will be someone on the other end of the phone.

"We talk to hundreds and hundreds of people on that day," she said. "I always tell people to think about the crisis line workers, think about the support line workers on the holidays, because they're here. They're always here."

AROUND THE AREA

WEST SIDE

Man shot to death on Christmas Eve

A 22-year-old man died on Christmas Eve after he was shot outside his home on the West Side.

San Antonio police said they responded to a shooting on the 500 block of Kernan Drive about 4:30 p.m. Friday.

The 22-year-old had been talking to an unknown man who had exited a vehicle, police said. The unknown man shot the 22-year-old "several times" as the 22-year-old ran inside his home, police said. The unknown man fled, they said.

First responders tried to save the 22-year-old's life, but he died.

NORTH SIDE

Man arrested in Christmas slaying

A 28-year-old man has been taken into custody and charged with murder after allegedly shooting a 24-year-old man to death at an apartment complex on the North Side.

At 11:40 a.m. Saturday, San Antonio police officers responded to multiple calls of shots fired at an apartment complex on the 1900 block of Larkspur Drive. Police said officers "were unable to assist" the shot 24-year-old because the 28-year-old was inside the apartment next to him.

When the alleged shooter eventually surrendered, he was taken into custody, police said. The 24-year-old was pronounced dead at the scene.

SAN ANTONIO

Flights continue to be disrupted

Christmas Day travelers at San Antonio International Airport were not immune to delays and cancellations that have been plaguing other flyers around the U.S. this holiday weekend.

According to the flight-tracking website FlightAware.com, five flights — three on Delta and two on United — had been canceled as of early Saturday afternoon. Another nine flights had been delayed.

Staffing issues linked to COVID-19 had forced nearly 900 flights to be canceled Saturday, the Associated Press reported.

SAN ANTONIO

Missing man has medical condition

San Antonio police are searching for 61-year-old Mark "Damien" Espejo, who last was contacted Dec. 23.

The Hispanic man is 5 feet, 11 inches tall with brown eyes and light gray hair. He has multiple tattoos on both arms.

In a Friday afternoon announcement, police said Espejo is a missing endangered adult. He has a medical condition requiring doctors' care, police said.

He last was seen in the 300 block of West Cypress wearing a red, collared, short-sleeved shirt, blue jeans and tennis shoes.

Anyone with information should call the missing persons unit at 210-207-7660.

NORTHWEST SIDE

Mom reunited with 5-year-old

A mother was reunited with her child on Christmas Eve about an hour after a suspect stole her vehicle with her child still in it.

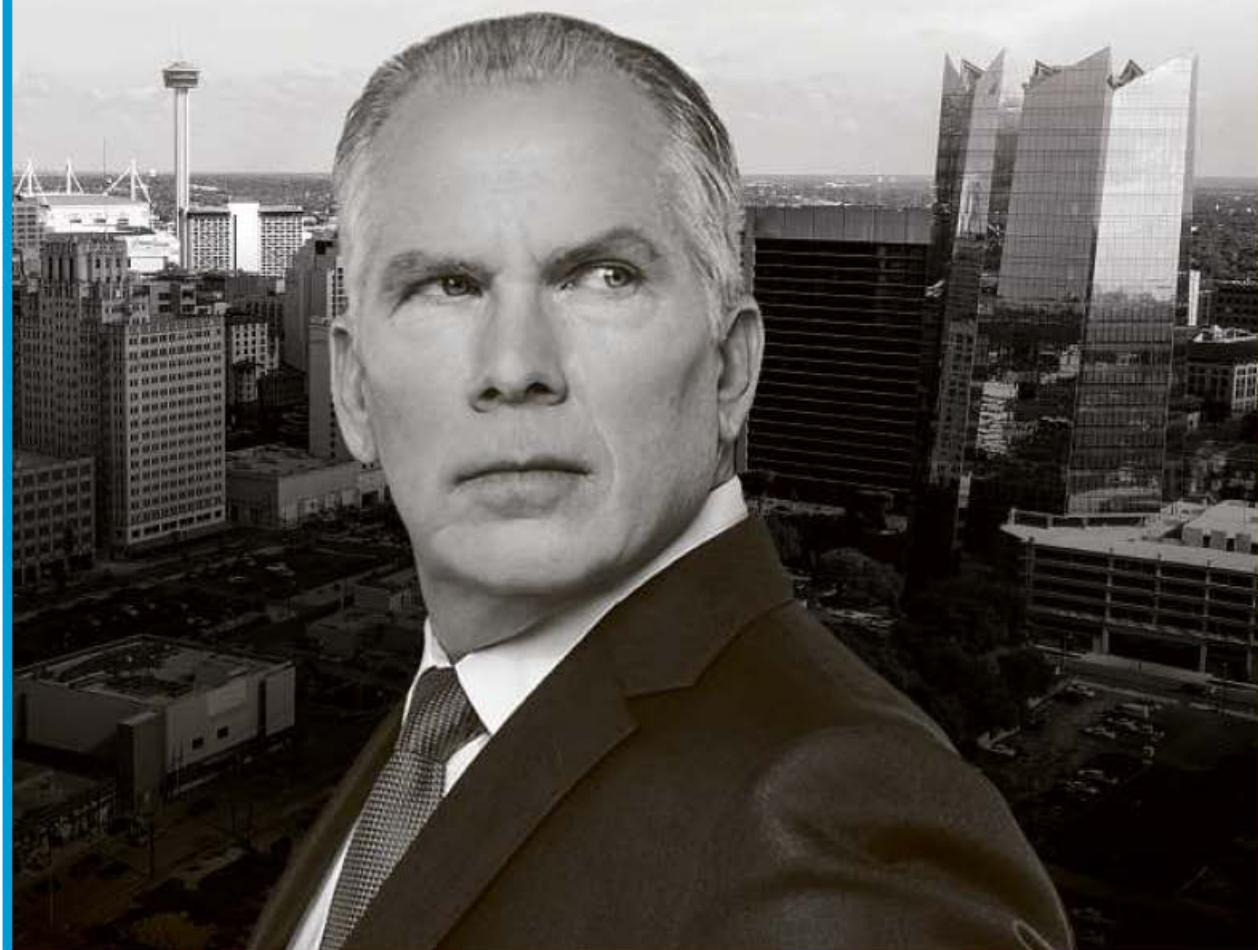
The mother left her 5-year-old in the vehicle while she was picking up a piñata in the 8700 block of Grissom Road at 1:30 p.m., police said. The mother saw someone get into her vehicle and drive away.

Just after 2:30 p.m., SAPD found both the vehicle and the unharmed child in a parking lot near the Conn's at Marbach Road and Loop 410.

From staff reports

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TEXAS VISTA

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GYN, an orthopedic surgeon, two sports medicine providers and a doctor specializing in podiatry and wound care.

Kumar, a board-certified general surgeon, was recruited in June, having previously worked for Methodist Healthcare.

"I think Texas Vista is a hidden gem," Kumar said. "It's been ignored for a long time, and the community suffered because they had to go to the (South Texas) Medical Center for services."

Kumar said he chose to work on the South Side because he wants to serve communities most in need.

The 327-bed acute care facility at 7400 Barlile Blvd. has been providing critical health care services to this historically underserved area for more than four decades and also serves nearby rural communities.

Through the hospital, Ku-

mar has opened a medical clinic in Pleasanton, a small town about 30 minutes south of San Antonio. He'll also soon teach new doctors in the operating room as part of the hospital's residency program.

"We want to show people that we're doing cool stuff down here," he said.

Texas Vista is training 43 internal medicine and psychiatric physicians from the University of the Incarnate Word's School of Osteopathic Medicine, which is at Brooks.

The hospital is owned by Steward Health Care, the largest physician-owned hospital network in the U.S. The Dallas-based system operates 44 hospitals in nine states and a handful internationally in Malta and Colombia.

Steward hired Jonathan Turton in January 2020 to run its only San Antonio facility. He previously was CEO of Baptist Medical Center and CEO at Broward Health Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

Dr. Ashwini Kumar, second from right, removes a patient's gallbladder at Texas Vista Medical Center. The hospital is undergoing several upgrades.

Since then, Turton has helped lead the hospital through the COVID-19 pandemic and shed its troubled reputation.

"The changes here are very noticeable," said Rebecca Martinez, the hospital's director of marketing and communications. "The culture has really changed. You can definitely feel it."

District 4 City Councilwoman Adriana Rocha Garcia said the hospital has lived up to its commitment of being an active member of the community it serves.

"Working alongside our South Side residents and community partners, the TVMC team is determined to change the health disparities affecting our vulnerable communities and transforming the way medical professionals see people as more than just patients," she said in an email Thursday.

She said doctors and medical staff engage with residents through community events like a baby shower in October, as well as vaccination clinics set up at South San Antonio Indepen-

dent School District and the Toyota plant farther south.

Garcia says the partnership the hospital established with Palo Alto College as part of Educate South "demonstrates the importance education plays in ensuring affordable and accessible high-quality medical care for residents."

Each baby born there goes home with a basket filled with goodies from the community college.

Besides the aesthetic benefit of having fewer scars, single-site surgeries mean less pain and reduced recovery time for Texas Vista patients, which is especially helpful for those who can't afford to take time off from work.

Enevia Acosta, an 18-year-old health care worker, had her gallbladder removed this week to alleviate the pain she'd felt for several months. Kumar said she could return to work in as soon as two days.

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