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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT GAP CONTRIBUTES  
TO INCREASED DEATHS**

*Lee County* – Local substance abuse and mental health professionals are joining forces to appeal to the state legislature for funding to help bring much needed substance abuse and mental health services to the growing population of Southwest Florida.

A joint request totaling \$3,739,479 will be presented to the Lee County Legislative Delegation Thurs., Nov. 17 from 1:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Edison College (Taeni Hall – Room S-117). The request is sponsored by Lee County government and includes Southwest Florida Addiction Services (SWFAS), the Ruth Cooper Center, Salvation Army and Lee County Human Services to respond to overwhelming needs in the region.

A recently released report from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and State Medical Examiner's office illustrates the cost of inadequate funding for substance abuse treatment, according to SWFAS officials. **Residents of Lee, Hendry and Glades counties are 2.2 times more likely to die from a lethal drug overdose than residents from the region of Florida that receives the most treatment funding**, the report indicates.

“This is a distressing tragedy that serves as a painful reminder of inadequate funding for these services,” said Kevin Lewis, Executive Director of Southwest Florida Addiction Services (SWFAS), the area's largest provider of substance abuse treatment services.

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“Southwest Florida is one of the fastest growing areas in the nation, but treatment resources continue to fall behind the growing needs. This has a significant impact not only on residents in need, but also other already strained and overburdened systems, such as emergency and trauma health care needs,” he said.

Lee, Collier, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties receive only 74% of the average state funding for adult substance abuse treatment services, making it the lowest funded region in Florida, and are the second lowest funded region for adolescent services. State allocations in Southwest Florida amount to \$92.90 per adult at risk, while Florida’s highest funded region receives \$239.08 for each adult at risk.

“SWFAS is reaching out to the Lee County Delegation for assistance in closing the gap. Local funding can only do so much to meet these needs. We need the local delegation to remedy this critical area where our area is not funded equitably. Without adequate funding more tragedies will continue to take place,” Lewis said.

Despite the funding disparity, the need for services in all of District 8 is growing exponentially. In the last year, more than 4,500 individuals and families received treatment services through SWFAS alone. Nearly four times that number were served by prevention programming throughout the community.

State and local estimates are that current systems meet the need of only about 1 in 6 folks who would benefit from treatment, again contributing to the challenges of homelessness and child abuse and neglect cases.

SWFAS is the region’s largest and oldest comprehensive substance abuse treatment program, treating more than 5,000 people per year from ages 9 to 90, with detoxification, outpatient, day treatment and residential programs offered from six locations throughout Lee County.

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