Opinion - March 30, 2018

Making mental health a bigger priority

As a result of the school shootings in Parkland, Florida, young folks have started a powerful movement — #neveragain. This is a time in history that calls for a huge change to what has become a normalized experience, as shown in the safety drills that schools practice across the country.

Some of us, when we were young, remember the "duck and cover" drills in the classroom for possible earthquakes in California. Now, my middle school son is going through the run-hide-fight drill to try and defend himself from a school shooter.

The kids make fun of the drill because they can't outrun an automatic weapon and only if they are lucky will they be missed. My son tells me you can Google "how to survive a school shooting." And one of the teens from Parkland pointed out, "You can't harm that many people with a knife," but with a machine gun the kids have no chance. The underlying, pervasive anxiety of kids knowing this is possible in schools is, at the very least, affecting the learning environment and, more seriously, often affecting the long-term physical and emotional health of our kids.

The nationwide school walkouts to call for gun control are bringing attention to the absolute need for change. The #neveragain movement is an important, nonviolent way for youth to get their voices heard. This youth movement is a powerful, focused and healthy way to externalize the tragic pain of loss. As a licensed marriage and family therapist and an art therapist in the community, I know about the importance of externalizing pain. Transforming negative energy into an art piece or project, can help reduce hopelessness and the perpetuation of negative thinking. Hopelessness and negativity can build up in individuals and cause people to make bad choices that hurt themselves and others. This #neveragain is a forum for all to join together in a common goal to get intelligent, young voices heard and to come up with new and different ways to make changes to this very large and complex system in which we live.

Empowering youth voices, helping kids feel safe and healthy along with crisis interventions are the daily tasks at the Community Health Awareness Council (CHAC). We have 80 therapists at 34 schools and an in-house clinic in Mountain View. CHAC therapists work to help kids learn healthy ways to externalize stress and pain and to identify and manage strong and difficult emotions. The therapists are also there to get help for kids who are being hurt and who are a danger to self and others. When kids have a safe place to talk with a trusted empathic adult they can begin to heal and change the way they see themselves and others. This level of intervention is sometimes invisible but invaluable to the health and safety of our school communities.

Every day we see how overwhelming the mental health needs are, we have constant waiting lists on every school campus and in the CHAC clinic. All mental health agencies need to partner together to help fill the need, as we focus on and make mental health a bigger priority. An increase in the visibility of the need for these services as well as the need for funding should be a part of our everyday lives.

Please join me in supporting organizations such as CHAC that are vital to the health and well-being of our communities.

Carol Mellberg is the associate/clinical director for school-based services at the Community Health Awareness Council (CHAC) in Mountain View.