

Nevada County first to enforce Laura's Law

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Nevada County will be the first in California to fully implement Laura's Law, the state statute that forces care upon those who refuse mental health treatment and are a danger to the community.

Only about five people in Nevada County each year would qualify for the involuntary treatment, according to Behavioral Health Director Michael Heggarty, because of strict eligibility requirements.

A bill introduced in the state Legislature last week could relax requirements for that treatment, but they remain strict for now, Heggarty said at the Board of Supervisors meeting Tuesday.

Under current rules, a petition first would have to be filed with the county's Superior Court to get an evaluation for a patient for possible placement into the program. If the court approved the evaluation, a judge would make the decision whether it amounts to involuntary treatment.

The person would have to be 18 or older and have a history of "multiple incarcerations and or hospitalizations" and refused treatment, Heggarty said.

About six other counties will watch how Nevada County will implement the law.

It was named after Laura Wilcox, 19, one of three county residents slain by mental health patient Scott Thorpe on Jan. 10, 2001.

Thorpe had stopped taking medication that had eased symptoms of a late-blooming mental illness.

Heggarty has been in contact with Orange County, and he expects more telephone calls and visits from the populous Southern California area's representatives after the local program starts April 1, he said. Several other counties are watching closely, but Heggarty said he was wary of naming them without their approval and until they show more interest.

Nevada County had to implement Laura's Law as part of its settlement of a lawsuit filed by the Wilcox family after the shootings. Other counties fear implementing it could trigger lawsuits because its involuntary nature is highly controversial across the country.

In November, Nevada County hired Sacramento firm Turning Point Treatment Center to handle the county's 50 most challenging mental health patients as part of the program.

"They're almost fully staffed and treating 20 to 25 people right now," Heggarty said - though none of the clients are in the Laura's Law program yet. Staff hope to get them enough treatment to keep them from repeatedly going to jail or hospital emergency rooms when they become too ill.

To get the program rolling, supervisors had to pass a resolution promising the new treatment would not diminish funding for any existing mental health programs. They did so unanimously.