

## State agency works to save seniors

By Jim Killackey  
Staff Writer

Karen Orsi can recite the list of mental health pitfalls that can be associated with growing old in Oklahoma:

Depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, isolation, loneliness, gambling and dementia are among the troubles Oklahoma senior citizens can face.

Every year, in fact, about 500 Oklahoma seniors commit suicide.

"Friends and relatives die off or move away. Children can be a thousand miles away. They might have a physical disability," said Orsi, an Areawide Aging Agency planner.

### Recognizing symptoms

"Many Oklahoma senior citizens are knocked to their knees," she said. "They lose a reason for living."

Orsi said more of the people who live, work and interact with senior citizens need to be able to recognize the symptoms and get help for them.

That's the goal of the revitalized Oklahoma Mental Health and Aging Coalition. Orsi is a vice chairman of the newly reorganized alliance.

"We can train people to recognize the signs of depression," Orsi said.

That would be particularly helpful for staff members at senior centers, nutrition sites, home-meal programs and adult day care centers, Orsi said.

While much is in the planning stages, Orsi said, the coalition wants to have senior mental health training sessions and seminars in libraries, churches and even on college campuses.

Nutrition sites sponsored by areawide aging agencies would be other locations.

Community forums free and open to the public will be scheduled, Orsi said.

Specific materials will be developed for all seminars and forums, she said.

She expects professionals in the field to volunteer their time and expertise for all training sessions.

She doesn't anticipate fees for any training seminars.

Orsi said one in four Oklahomans older than 60 will experience a clinically significant change in their thinking or emotions. Many are diagnosed with conditions such as depression, dementia or anxiety "for the first time as they age," she said.

Many will misuse or abuse alcohol or prescription medication.

Mental health changes in people over 60 often are linked to physical disorders such as heart attacks and strokes. They also may be associated with metabolic changes, medication interactions, infections and personal losses.

The coalition has current information about mental health and substance-abuse issues facing seniors and serves as a resource to public policy makers as well as consumers and other concerned citizens. It advocates for the funding of resources to support the mental health needs of seniors and their caregivers.

For more information about the coalition or the mental health and substance abuse issues facing older Oklahomans, go to organization's Web site at [www.omhac.org](http://www.omhac.org).

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