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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PILOT TRIAGE PROJECT DECLARED A SUCCESS

A pilot project to help individuals access substance abuse and mental health services was declared a success by leaders of three community agencies Friday, who said a Triage Center would save taxpayers at least \$1.4 million a year, if the Legislature approves money to continue the project.

“We’re gonna go back and ask again,” Lee County Commissioner Bob Janes said after hearing the report. “And if we don’t get the money (from the Legislature), we’ll keep asking until we get a program. Look at this as a first step.”

Janes and fellow Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann were among about 40 officials who were present at a luncheon Friday hosted by SWFAS to thank those involved in the pilot project.

“We are very pleased with the success of the project,” said SWFAS CEO Kevin B. Lewis. “A total of 137 individuals were referred to the triage team and 58 percent were successfully linked to appropriate services. These are people who otherwise would have wound up in our emergency rooms or jails, which are not equipped to manage the needs of those with substance abuse issues or who have a mental illness.”

Lee County officials submitted a request in 2005 to the State Legislature for \$3.5 million to operate the proposed new triage center. Plans are to build the new facility on Evans Avenue adjacent to the new SWFAS Detoxification Center that is slated to break ground later this year.

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The Florida Legislature denied the request, but last year awarded \$200,000 for the pilot project, which refers individuals in need of mental health and substance abuse services to appropriate agencies for help. The goal was to reduce use of more expensive services such as jails and local emergency rooms.

The triage team was formed last November among Lee Mental Health, SWFAS and the Salvation Army to meet and assess individuals referred for services by the Fort Myers Police Department and other law enforcement agencies.

“The team members have met people literally on the streets, in parks, in the woods – because we have no center to take them. The team received referrals from the Fort Myers Police Department and team members then went out to find the person needing assistance,” said Rosemary Boisvert of SWFAS.

Among the services received were detoxification services, residential treatment, halfway house placement, emergency shelter, groceries, eyeglasses, clothing, household goods, permanent housing placement, and even a glass eye, according to Boisvert.

Officials are hopeful that the success of the project eventually will convince the State Legislature to appropriate the funds needed to build the triage center.

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Cutlines:

1) Triage Partners: (l - r) Molly Bundy, Salvation Army; Jennifer Spencer, Lee Mental Health; Lee Commissioner Bob Janes; Brenda Lane, Salvation Army; and Rosemary Boisvert, SWFAS.

2) Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann congratulates Ann Arnall of Lee County Human Services on the success of the triage pilot project.

3) SWFAS CEO Kevin B. Lewis discusses the project with Fort Myers Police Major Douglas Baker.

4) Fort Myers Police Sgt. Ken Leach tells the group about the role the Fort Myers Police Department played in referring individuals to the triage team.