

24-hour helpline for mentally ill launched in city

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Pune: A round-the-clock helpline launched by Mumbai-based Vandrevala Foundation will help tend to people with mental sicknesses in Pune. The mental health helpline, 022-25706000, was launched in the city on August 17.

Armed with a team of trained psychologists and psychiatrists, it will cater to all kinds of mental sicknesses, said Arun John, executive vice-president of Vandrevala Foundation, at a press conference on Tuesday.

The helpline, even though based in Mumbai, has tied up with 28 psychiatrists, who are members of the Pune Psychiatrists' Association, who will be tending to the callers seeking help on mental sickness. "This helpline began a year ago in Mumbai as a pilot project on mental health initiative. The objective behind this was to do away with the stigma associated with mental sicknesses and to facilitate re-inclusion of such people into society. Also, we wanted to bridge the gap between medical specialists who provide such treatments and those who need such treatments by forming a proper network," said John.

The helpline is planning to tie-up with major private and government hospitals in Pune, said Aniruddha Joshi, member of the core team behind the helpline. "Efforts are also on to tie up with the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC), the city police, the fire brigade and other services in Pune," added Joshi.

Since 2009, the helpline has catered to around 7,500 calls from all over India. "We

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have been receiving around 100 calls every month from people of all age groups, with almost 25 calls from Pune," said John.

The helpline aims to have a pan-India presence. "We plan to set up nodal centres in Chennai and New Delhi, within the next four months. We also intend to set up a virtual call centre that will direct callers to the nearest nodal centres. We are also planning to introduce telepsychiatry, as well as a face-to-face crisis intervention facility," added John.

In the capacity of consultants, the team behind the helpline also intends to assist the government of Maharashtra for upgradation of the mental hospitals within the state. "As per the state government's request, we have already submitted a report on a six-phase upgradation plan of the Thane Mental Hospital, which is for due consideration. We intend to act as consultants for other mental hospitals if the state government asks us to," said John.