

Touro provides autism training

By Sarah Rohrs/Times-Herald staff writer

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Touro University's special education program chairman, Keith Storey, right, and project coordinator Michal Post are behind efforts to improve education and services for the increasing number of children and adults with autism. (Sarah Rohrs/Times-Herald)

Why more children have autism is a mystery, but there's no doubt early diagnosis and treatment is critical, say two creators of a Vallejo education and training program.

"We have so many more students with autism. It's been an explosion," said Michal Post, Touro University project coordinator. "It's been blowing the system apart."

Touro's special education program chairman, Keith Storey, and Post have created a new program aimed at training teachers and service providers to diagnose and help autistic children and adults lead fulfilling lives.

Such training is vital as the huge number of autistic children enter schools and tax special education classes and services, they said.

"The system is not set up to handle the number (of children with autism) as they age through the system," Storey said. "It's a huge strain."

The Centers for Disease Control estimate as many as 1 in 150 children have autism or other disabilities that fall under the autism spectrum disorder umbrella.

The cause of autism and reasons for the rising numbers is cause of much debate and research. Storey said autism could be related to changing environmental factors, or increased awareness and diagnoses.

Children with autism spectrum disorders are among the nearly 12 percent of California students who receive special education services, according to the state.

Autism is a complex brain disorder which impairs a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. It can also be associated with rigid routines and repetitive behaviors.

Funded with an \$800,000 Department of Education grant, Touro's new program allows students to focus specifically on autism and effective treatment and interventions.

Students gain a masters degree in special education with an emphasis in autism spectrum disorders. Such training is in stark contrast to more traditional special education training which includes -- but does not focus strongly on -- autism and related disorders, Storey said.

Touro's courses provide an overview of autism spectrum disorders, and also delve into the psychological, social and educational characteristics of those diagnosed with the disorder. Students also learn therapy and interventions which can help autistic individuals manage their behavior and integrate into society, Post and Storey said.

Both are strongly opposed to programs which prevent autistic children and adults from having regular contact and interaction with other children and adults.

Touro's new master's degree special education program began in February. Through the grant, students will receive stipends to help pay for tuition.