

As calls double, Counseling Service responds in new ways

Thu, 04/16/2020 - 1:21pm meganj **By:** John Flowers



COUNSELING SERVICE OF Addison County school-based clinician Joelle Francis has set up technology and space to effectively offer services from her home.

The majority (of the calls) are around loneliness and isolation. It's about not knowing when it's going to end, and meeting basic needs. Are they going to have enough food in the next few weeks? They can't pay their utilities. — Greg Mairs, CSAC

MIDDLEBURY — Counseling Service of Addison County (CSAC) officials are seeing a surge in calls from people who are becoming increasingly anxious about the isolation and economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

The organization is encouraging people to call the 388-7641, at any time, for emotional support to help carry them through these difficult times. And CSAC is also creating a “warm line” for people who may not be in crisis, but who simply need to talk things out with a receptive, empathetic person.

“People are frightened,” Greg Mairs, CSAC’s director of the developmental services, said during a recent phone interview. “CSAC is preparing for an uptick in need; I think we’re going to see more and more of that as the days pass by.”

Prior to COVID-19, CSAC’s mental health counselors would field an average of 15 contacts per day, according to Mairs. That number has now doubled, and will likely triple by the end of this week, he added. It actually took a week or so for the anticipated increase in calls to occur, Mairs said, pointing to “shock” as a possible reason for the delay.

The agency has, in a very short time, reconfigured its staffing and technology to allow it to deliver services remotely.

“We are 100 percent mobile on crisis services at this point, doing telehealth and Zoom with assessments at Porter Hospital,” Mairs said. “And we also have the capability to do that with people in their homes.” Clients who don’t have computers are served by phone.

Most of the calls for CSAC service these days are coronavirus-related. And Mairs is among those fielding the calls.

“The majority (of the calls) are around loneliness and isolation,” he said. “It’s about not knowing when it’s going to end, and meeting basic needs. Are they going to have enough food in the next few weeks? They can’t pay their utilities. They know they aren’t going to be shut off, but are they going to be able to handle the bills when the support ends? A lot of concern about making rent, and wait times online with unemployment.”

Late last week, Mairs assisted a CSAC client (by phone) who’d been out of food for 24 hours and couldn’t bring herself to go to a supermarket less than a block away.

It was about “providing her with the assurance it was OK to do that if she followed all the steps the CDC has asked us to follow,” Mairs recalled.

The Counseling Service has around 300 full- and part-time workers, none of whom have been laid off during the pandemic.

“We continue to hold on to our staff, redeploy those who we can and need to, and are leveraging federal and state resources to keep our staff employed,” CSAC Executive Office Coordinator Jennifer Staats said through an email. “Our goal is to emerge from this with our workforce intact.”

ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Many CSAC staffers whose jobs can be performed remotely have chosen to stay at home. Other workers at the agency don't have that option, as their functions have been deemed essential. Among them are those who staff CSAC's six residential programs.

Some CSAC departments are temporarily depleted, in terms of on-site staffing.

"In our developmental services program, we're down to nine full-time employees doing essential community-based services, which is about 20 percent of our (usual staffing for that department)," Mairs said.

He praised workers and patients for their adaptability during the pandemic.

"It's incredible that CSAC has been able to change the way it provides services, in a matter of days," Mairs said, "and existing clients and consumers have come right along with us. The transition to telehealth and phone work has been well received in light of the pandemic; people have really shown resilience." When face-to-face encounters are needed — such as in CSAC's residential programs — officials are following safety protocols issued by the Vermont Department of Health and U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

In 2018 the organization served 2,358 total clients, and 2,316 in 2019.

CSAC operates six homes in Addison County. Four are group homes, and the other two are single-person residences. Staff members are using masks, and will soon be attired in hospital scrubs. Frequent hand washing, health screenings and taking temperatures are a must.

"We're really trying to do everything we can to tighten things up, in terms of potential exposure risks," said Alexander "Sandy" Smith, director of Community Rehabilitation and Treatment Services at CSAC. "One of our (group homes) is entirely closed off to visitation, and the residents are staying on-site," Smith said. "It's just the staff coming and going. The staff are using precautions while on site, and we're also doing (temperature) checks on staff prior to coming in for their shifts."

"Staff have really been doing an extraordinary job of hanging in with this, and thoughtfully attending to the residents in these complicated and tense circumstances," Smith said. "They've been amazing." These efforts appear to have paid dividends. No residents of the group homes have tested positive for COVID-19 at this juncture.

Staff and clients are missing the personal contact, but it can't be helped — for now.

"Direct contact and face-to-face experiences being together with people is one of our most important ways of working," Smith said. "So it's certainly impactful to not be able to do that in the same way. I think for those with whom we've been able to do Zoom or telemedicine connections, that's gone as well as we could have hoped. But a lot of people we work with don't have that access to technology to the internet. So we're then relying on the phone and greatly reduced face-to-face contact."

Those in need of CSAC services should call 388-7641, or go online csac-vt.org.

Reporter John Flowers is at johnf@addisonindependent.com.