

Charities begins counseling services in rural northwest

By John Baccala
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FAIRFAX - Licensed clinical social worker Carol Weipert knew there was a need for her services in northwest Missouri. She also knew getting people to see her might be a problem. "One thing I've found, especially in the rural areas, is there's still a stigma about counseling," she said.

While the stigma might still exist, Weipert has clients every week at the recently-opened counseling clinic in Fairfax, about 55 miles northwest of St. Joseph. Catholic Charities of Kansas City-St. Joseph partnered with the Community Hospital Association, Fairfax, to offer the services there and offers a similar program in Albany.

"We're doing this as a service to our community," said Marilyn Alldredge, the director of development for the Community Hospital Association. The hospital provides the site inside the Fairfax Family Practice Center for free and regularly writes about the service in the hospital newsletter.

Allredge, who is the chairman of the advisory board of Catholic Charities Northwest Missouri, said logistics also played a role in opening the clinic. "The closest counseling facility was in Maryville and it was just too far for some of the people to drive" she said.

"There just wasn't anything in that particular area," Weipert added. "We're the first one up there in that corner of the world."

Weipert, who has been working for Catholic Charities for more than 15 years, sees clients at the Fairfax clinic on Wednesday afternoons. Licensed clinical social worker Robin Bourland sees clients in Albany, about 65 miles northeast of St. Joseph, on Thursday afternoons.

Weipert said not only is there still a stigma attached to counseling, but most people won't seek help from someone "local." "Folks just don't want to be seen by people they know," she said. "This is more private. There's a better chance of staying anonymous."

Weipert called removing the stigma associated with getting help "the biggest hurdle in counseling." Alldredge said that is exactly the reason why the Fairfax clinic isn't in the hospital building. "I really felt it was best not to have it within the hospital, because there's always a stigma, it seems like, with people going into the hospital for counseling," she said.

The Fairfax clinic serves clients from several neighboring communities including Rock Port, Tarkio, and Mound City. While their life and lifestyles differ, Weipert said the issues facing rural patients are virtually the same as those facing their urban counterparts.

"It's a pretty broad spectrum," she said, "but most have to do with some sort of family relationship, or depression."

"Some of it is economic," Weipert continued. "The whole area's changed, the days of the family farm like we knew it is gone, and the way some people have been raised has had some drastic altering."

Alldredge is fighting another stigma unique to the rural areas. She's trying to eliminate the notion that Catholic Charities helps only those in the city and only helps Catholics. "Catholic Charities hasn't been too well known in rural areas until the last few years," she said, "but that's changing! It just takes time to get going."

Awareness should increase now that school has started again. Alldredge has already met with many of the surrounding schools in Atchison and Holt counties about the program.

"I worked very closely with the schools and they were seeing a need, because counselors in the schools are not usually certified counselors, they have more of an educational background than psychological," Alldredge said. "I really think with schools starting up again, the counselors in the schools will be trying to refer some of the students that need some additional assistance."

So far, the response to the counseling service has been good.

"The doctors are just so pleased to see it," Alldredge said. So is Weipert. She has five clients. She is ready to help more. But, the first step and the last step, is always the clients.

"The therapist's job is not to tell you what to do, but to help you find a path," she said. "The choice is ultimately their own."

Appointments for the counseling service can be set up through the Catholic Charities office in St. Joseph by calling (888) 629-2886 toll free. Health care providers and schools can make the referrals or clients can make their own appointment. Fees are on a sliding scale.