

STORY FROM THE FIELD

Jasper County Health Department – Newton, IL Population Served: 10,100

To find out what the mental health program at the Jasper County Health Department (IL) means to its community, look no further than the letters stacked on the desk of Louise Lybarger, Director of Behavioral Health.

“I called other counselors before I came to this agency,” says one letter. “I didn’t have any money at the time. They turned me down and wouldn’t help me. Jasper County Health Department took me in and worked with me until I could support myself. I have seriously wondered where I would be now without their help.”

FAST FACT

A NACCHO survey found that over the past 12 months, 55 percent of local health departments have made cuts to important public health programs.

The mental health and substance abuse program at this health department in rural Illinois is the only program of its kind in a 25 mile radius. There is no hospital in the county. Clients of the program are facing challenges as varied as depression, schizophrenia, and eating disorders.

“I’ve been here for 20 years,” says Lybarger. “Over time, we’ve worked really hard to build this program. We’ve helped people stay independent and become productive members of society. And we’ve gained a reputation in surrounding counties as the agency that can get people in and take care of them.”

However, budget pressures in recent years have reduced the staff from five counselors to three. This year’s 60 percent cut from the state of Illinois threatens up to two additional positions.

“People think we probably get county money,” says public health administrator, Joel Clark. “What they don’t know is that

over time, those funds have pretty much eroded. Unless we can get some funding, those services won’t be there.”

While budgets have been slashed dramatically, the need for services has not decreased. The clinic still juggles a caseload of up to 200 clients and works diligently to extend help to the 20 or more people that are on a waiting list. Recently, there has also been an influx of new people – emotional casualties of the economic crisis.

“Right now, the number one thing we have to address is depression and anxiety from people who have lost their jobs or their homes,” says Clark. “A majority of those people have never sought services before. They never thought that they would ever have to seek services.”

As staff face the steady dismantling of the mental health services at Jasper County Health Department, they worry what this means for the clients and the community.

“What’s most alarming to me now is that if we can’t provide these services, there’s no one else that will be doing it,” says Lybarger. “The people we serve and the needs they have don’t go away. People will end up going to the police department and the emergency room – they’ll be shifting to other service sectors that are not prepared to help them. In the end, that does not save money.”

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