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Counseling program facing funding cut

By Arthur Hahn arthur@brenhambanner.com May 5, 2018

A program that provides free mental health counseling could be on life support.

The Telehealth Counseling Clinic, which has been providing mental health services to residents here since 2013, is expected to have its funding cut off at the end of this year, said Washington County Judge John Brieden.

TCC operates under the Department of Educational Psychology and the Department of Health Promotion and Community Health Sciences at Texas A&M University. It works with Washington County and Faith Mission, with services offered at the Washington County Health Services Center (WCHSC). WCHSC, located in the former Brenham Police Department, is administered by Faith Mission.



Brieden said he saw an opportunity to have the teleconferencing service added when the WCHSC opened soon after he took office 7 1/2 years ago.

"We brought in public health folks from the state, a medication assistance program, about eight different things," he said. "We were looking at it and talking about what we need to do."

“One of the things that I was on the warpath about is that I felt MHMR (the state’s Mental Health-Mental Retardation agency) has not been doing a good job of servicing our county. We have needs that need to be met that were not being met by them.”

Brieden said he learned about a pilot teleconference counseling program in Centerville that had been established and looked into expanding that service to Washington County.

The county converted two old jail cells into interview rooms, which are used to provide secure counseling sessions.

In the program, doctoral students in the psychology counseling program work one-on-one with patients via teleconferencing, under the supervision of licensed psychologists. Dr. Carly McCord has served as TCC’s director since its inception.

Brieden said the free service is heavily utilized, with an average of 25-30 counseling sessions a month. The county has had no expenses from the program, other than the startup requirements.

“We haven’t had to pay anything at all for that service,” he said.

Brieden said A&M’s health sciences administrators have made the decision “that telecounseling wasn’t as important as some other things that they wanted to do” and is planning to shift that funding to diabetes awareness.

“It just blows my mind,” he said. “I feel MHMR is not providing what this community needs. They weren’t before and they still aren’t.

"This (teleconferencing counseling) is helping, but we still do not have adequate mental health services in this county.

"If it's not there, we will have bigger, more needs that are unmet than we do currently.

"The bottom line is that if we take this area of treatment out and say, 'Okay, community, sorry about that. It's not there any more,' then we will have a whole lot more unmet needs."

Brieden said he plans to discuss the teleconference counseling program with A&M health services officials and even with member of the university's Board of Regents if necessary.

McCord is also looking at other funding options, he added.

"She's indicated she doesn't want it to go away," said Brieden. "Neither do we."

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