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## Halting mental service could have devastating effect

By Arthur Hahn [arthur@brenhambanner.com](mailto:arthur@brenhambanner.com) May 12, 2018

In a region already grossly underserved in mental health care, discontinuing a free counseling service could have a profound negative impact, officials say.

The Telehealth Counseling Clinic, which began serving the Brazos Valley in 2009 and expanded to Washington County in 2013, has been told its funding will stop at the end of this year.

The clinic has provided more than \$1 million in free counseling in the region — and has probably saved “that much or more in other health care utilization costs,” said Dr. Carly McCord, who has served as TCC’s director since its inception.



In the program, doctoral students in Texas A&M University’s psychology counseling program work one-on-one with patients via teleconferencing, under the supervision of licensed psychologists. Sessions here are held in secured rooms at the Washington County Health Services Center.

McCord said positive results of the program are clear.

“In a recent case study, under review with the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, we looked at one client served by the Telehealth Counseling Clinic who, if they continued on the same trajectory of emergency service and hospital utilization for anxiety symptoms, could have cost the region

almost \$400,000," she said.

Texas already ranks here the bottom of state spending on mental health and has "the highest proportion of mental health professional shortage areas in the nation," said McCord. "Two-thirds of licensed psychologists work in five counties, leaving the other 249 fighting over the remaining third. The Brazos Valley specifically is underserved.

"The best performing counties in the country have a ratio of one provider to every 400 people. The Brazos Valley region has a ratio of 1 to 7,554. Our local mental health authorities are severely underfunded and tasked with serving a specific subset of individuals with mental health concerns and providing them a specific subset of services. TCC has successfully sustained services — offered free of charge to Brazos Valley residents — for nine years through grant funding.

Initial funding for starting services in two counties was obtained through the Health Resources and Services Administration. Then through the Texas 1115 Medicaid Waiver, TCC was able add three more counties, including Washington.

But the Texas Medicaid 1115 Waiver recently announced a two-year renewal which shifted funds away from projects and towards approved providers," said McCord.

"In this shift, the telehealth counseling clinic is no longer being funded to serve the counties," she said. "Over the last five years, for every one local dollar spent at the local level, an estimated \$30 of funding from the Medicaid Waiver and other donations and resources from Texas A&M University was added to ensure the program's success.

“Without the waiver funding allocated for serving the rural communities, the Telehealth Counseling Clinic will not be able to continue to provide services without increased financial support from the community.”

McCord said she would like to see the counseling expanded to all seven counties in the Brazos Valley to help meet the needs of residents.

“Over 90 percent of clients in our rural counties say they would have gone without services if not for TCC,” she said. “Almost half of our clientele come in with thoughts of hurting themselves or others.

“Within five sessions, clients experience an average decrease of 4-5 points on our depression measure, the Patient Health Questionnaire 9. This means they drop in a range of severity from severe to moderately severe or moderate to mild.”

That decrease, said McCord, is “statistically significant.”

“One in five adults experiences a mental illness in a given year, costing the country almost \$200 billion. Giving access to counseling helps with cost avoidance on many levels. When we can create safety plans and check-ins with clients as opposed to an inpatient hospitalization, on average, \$4,500 is saved,” she said.

“When we can treat the anxiety and help individuals cope with panic attacks instead of going to emergency room via an ambulance for complaints of chest pain, we save an average of \$450 for the ambulance ride and \$3,000 for the ER visit.

“More important than money, we have experienced so many success stories over the years. We have seen hundreds of people either learn to cope better with their mental health conditions or no longer meet criteria for a mental illness all together.

“People have gone from homelessness to housing, re-entered the workforce, stopped inappropriately using emergency services, repaired broken relationships, improved self-esteem, stayed out of the prison system and gone on to make a positive impact in their homes, workplaces and communities as their quality of life has improved through counseling.”

Individuals interested in counseling can call 979 458-9990.

More information is also available at [www.telehealth.org](http://www.telehealth.org).

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