

Family Counseling Services 140th Anniversary

Why Making Families Stronger Matters

By Peggy Werner

When Sue Razbadouski began her counseling career at Family Counseling Services (FCS) as a student intern, in the 1990s, she was impressed that people could get the information they needed to live happier, healthier lives, at an affordable price.

After college graduation, she returned to FCS for 20 years, serving as its executive director from 1997 to 2013. Today she works in private practice, but continues her support for FCS by serving on its board of directors.

“When people have enough courage to reach out for help, they shouldn’t be turned away because they have no insurance or money,” says Razbadouski. “We believe that, regardless of income, all people deserve the same level of care at a price they can afford. A lot of people are dedicated to this agency because we help people live better lives.”

Located at 210 N. Longwood St., FCS provides counseling, psychotherapy and family life education to people living in Winnebago, Boone and Ogle counties. FCS believes that early intervention prevents small problems from becoming worse, as people navigate the everyday stressors of life. FCS offers services on a sliding-fee scale based on a client’s income. The least amount of money a person pays out-of-pocket is \$22 and the most is \$140, the minimum typically charged by private providers.

A Worthwhile Challenge

As the agency observes its 140th anniversary, it moves forward with a renewed belief in the need for its services. It’s also facing a new reality as local non-profits compete for diminishing donor dollars.

FCS has always relied upon client fees, insurance reimbursements, grants, fundraisers and other private contributions to provide its services. For the first time, it’s now seeking Medicaid certification in order to



Sue Razbadouski



FCS has a long history of treating patients with mental health conditions in our community.

serve more low-income clients.

“The need is great and people are dependent upon our help,” says Eileen Liezert, FCS executive director.

Liezert came out of retirement two years ago to help the agency rebuild. She had worked as the Children’s Home and Aid Society executive director since 1985, developing mental health programs for both children and adults.

Liezert’s goal at FCS was to work with the 10-member board for six months to assess the agency’s effectiveness and decide whether or not it had a future. Two years later, she’s still onboard. Everyone involved has concluded that FCS has a mission worth preserving. Funding may be shrinking, but the incidence of mental illness is not.

In the interest of stretching dollars, Liezert has streamlined FCS, employing only part-time staff members. She’s also applied for additional grant money. In October 2015, FCS opened a

Dancing With the Rock Stars, the agency's biggest fundraiser, will be at 6 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 18, at Giovanni's, 610 N. Bell School Road. Several local celebrities spend months preparing for this dance competition, which is now in its 12th year. Arthur Murray Dance Center, 7326 N. Cherryvale Drive, provides the lessons and choreographs routines. The evening includes a dinner, slide presentation on FCS, live and silent auctions and an open dance. The cost is \$65 per person or \$600 for a table for 10.



Boone County location at 860 Biester Drive in Belvidere. Plans are underway to find office space in Ogle County, too. That office will be supported in part with a \$1,000 grant from Rochelle Community Foundation and a \$5,000 grant from United Way of Ogle County.

"Financial support from traditional funders like the United Way of Rock River Valley has decreased, as it, too, has had to adjust to changing times," says Liezert.

But the need for services speaks for itself, she adds.

"Just look at all the violence in our society, the rising problem with drug addiction and the trauma of war and uncertainty in the world and how it affects everyone," she says. "Some people won't get mental health help if they can't meet their other basic needs. In Rockford, one in four children lives in poverty and the crime rate puts us all at risk."

Many unknowns remain, in part due to uncertainty in state and federal government healthcare policies and budget priorities.

"We need to find a stabilizing factor where we can all come together and provide needed services to help people be safe and get the treatment they need," says Liezert. "There's a huge correlation between physical health and mental health and there are pilot projects in a lot of places exploring what can be done."

"I would like to see us approach emotional health issues the way medical health issues are addressed, by getting help right away, when needed, to prevent serious consequences from unmet needs. And we have to drop the stigma. Mental illness doesn't evoke the same response as a physical illness and that needs to stop."

Liezert is seeing some positive developments in this regard.

FCS was recently granted \$20,000 from the SwedishAmerican Foundation and \$15,000 from the Dr. Louis and Violet Rubin

Fund of the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois' community grants programs. These grants help to subsidize about 800 hours of counseling. On average, clients need 8 to 10 sessions to get back on track, she says. Some resolve issues more quickly, some need more time.

Liezert views the grant from SwedishAmerican as an indication that the medical world is becoming more aware of how mental health affects physical health. She explains



Eileen Liezert

that Collaborative Care is a relatively new concept in U.S. health-care that's proving successful. It occurs when medical professionals work with families, communities, and professionals dealing with mental and behavioral health, public health, physical therapy, nutrition, and other disciplines, to deliver the best care to people. The result is reduced cost from less duplication of services, fewer medical errors, shorter hospital stays, quicker recovery times and happier patients and staff.

Liezert emphasizes that milder mental health problems can lead to bigger ones, including serious mental illness, if left undiagnosed and untreated. For example, people who hear about crimes in their neighborhood may develop a fear of going outside. They may become isolated, paranoid and more dependent on others to meet their basic needs, rather than being engaging with life and getting the most out of it.

Treatment Trends

The history of treating mental illness in the U.S. is a convoluted one, impacted by various social programs and shifting political agendas. While responsibility for mental health treatment has often been shifted to the local level, adequate funding has not. The Community Mental Health Act, signed by President John F. Kennedy in 1963, put an end to state psychiatric hospital care for all patients except those "who posed an imminent danger to themselves or someone else."

A movement toward rehabilitation of people with severe mental illness grew in the 1970s; it was also an era marked by traumatized veterans returning home from Vietnam. The Mental Health Systems Act of 1980 was signed by President Jimmy Carter, providing grants to community mental health centers, which were now bearing much of the brunt for providing mental health treatment. But that Act was mostly repealed under President Ronald Reagan, in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981. Homelessness rose dramatically in following years, as did incarceration rates.

The original idea behind deinstitutionalization of patients with serious mental illness was that communities would work with people who needed help, through programs funded by the state and federal governments.

"It was a worthy thought, but services didn't get the financial support they needed to operate," Liezert says.

As a result, many Americans became homeless, landed in prison or suffered other negative fates unnecessarily because they couldn't function in society. The same holds true today.

Ladies Union Aid Society

FCS has a history of meeting the most immediate needs of its community.

Originally called the Ladies Union Aid Society, the organization has been renamed four times in 140 years, as it evolves to meet society's needs.

In the beginning, the Rockford community sought an organized means to relieve everyday suffering for those who couldn't afford basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. Much later, as government aid programs were developed to meet those needs, the organization's focus switched from financial help to counseling.

Other local independent agencies formed as a result of FCS programs, including Visiting Nurses Association, Winnebago County Mental Health Association, Goodwill Industries, Goldie Floberg Center, Ken Rock Community Center and Rockford Day Nursery.

Says Razbadouski, "The agency has stayed true to its roots and is focused on helping people to live their lives better and more happily. Our goal is to strengthen families, so they can help, rather than hurt, one another and the family unit."

And the entire community benefits when more families are happier and healthier.

A good counselor finds out what's going on in the life of a client and helps them to access both inner resources and community resources to solve problems, be resilient, heal and manage stress.

"What hits people the hardest is the times of transition, when they've experienced a death, divorce, job loss or other major life

change," explains Razbadouski. "With any crisis, there are lifelong repercussions, but that's not all bad. Tough times make us stronger and help us to develop coping skills. Depression can be a lifelong illness, but it can be managed so it doesn't steal your life away from you."

A lot of problem areas in life can be improved through good practices within families, she says. For example, setting boundaries is a key to raising children who become happy and productive adults.

"If kids know what to expect from their parents, they get a sense of safety and structure that helps them to learn how to structure their own lives, which can help them develop good judgment, responsibility and independence as they grow older," says Razbadouski.

Mental health problems like depression and anxiety and life stresses like divorce affect people in all walks of life. While FCS therapists work with people from every socioeconomic group, they have special expertise in working with low-income children and adults.

Living in poverty has its own challenges, putting people at greater risk for mental health issues, says Razbadouski.

"The goal is to offer the highest level of care and FCS is committed to providing each client the same skilled and compassionate care, regardless of their income," she adds.

FCS clinicians are trained to help people to manage the stresses in their lives and they believe in everyone's capacity to change. Just having someone who listens without judging can be very healing. Unlike talking to a friend or relative, counseling is confidential.

FCS was awarded the 2008 Crusader Clinic "Spirit of Caring" award and the 2005 Rockford Register Star Excelsior Award.

The office is open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday and closed Fridays. For more information, go to familycounselingrockford.org or call (815) 962-5585.

The need for affordable mental health care continues to grow and the availability of good counseling services benefit society as a whole. With appropriate treatment, people who experience mental illness such as anxiety, depression or bi-polar disease can still work and function, says Liezert.

"Those with serious mental illness are falling through the cracks," says Liezert. "It's easy to spot a person with a broken leg, but you can't look at a person and see a broken soul or the torment that a person faces from their own inability to function in the world." ■



Mental Health Statistics

- Every year, one in five U.S. adults experiences mental illness and one in 25 experiences serious mental illness, meaning they can't function in their family and society.
- Only 41 percent of U.S. adults with a mental health condition receive mental health services.
- Among adults with a serious mental illness, only 62.9 percent received services in the past year.
- Mental health conditions are the third most common cause of hospitalization in the U.S. for people ages 18 to 44.
- One in five youths, ages 13 to 15, experiences a severe mental disorder.
- In any given year, about 18 percent of U.S. adults experience an anxiety disorder
- About 26 percent of homeless adults live with serious mental illness; About 46 percent of them live with severe mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders.
- About 20 percent of state prisoners and 21 percent of local jail inmates have a recent history of a mental health condition.
- About 70 percent of youths in juvenile justice systems have at least one mental health condition and at least 20 percent live with a serious mental illness.

Source: *National Alliance on Mental Illness*