

Funding ends for sober living program

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Supports for Stability and Sobriety had served clients in Isanti County — one Cambridge man speaks out

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By Dawn Slade

Mille Lacs County Times

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The Supports for Stability and Sobriety Program has been serving clients in Mille Lacs, Kanabec, Pine, Chisago and Isanti counties since its inception in January 2002.

The program is unique because it deals with chemical dependency issues as well as diagnosed mental illnesses (referred to as dual disorder).

The program has also been providing support for family members of those with dual disorder.

The purpose of the program, which ended June 30, was to provide men and women (ages 18 and older), who have completed chemical dependency treatment, with aftercare and support for their recovery and their mental health issues with weekly support groups.

Since it began, the program has admitted over 1,055 people. This last year, 277 active clients were served, along with 79 family members.

The program was free to consumers and they were welcomed back after a relapse.

Just two weeks after ending, the program is already missed.

Mille Lacs County Jail Program Coordinator Bob Hoheisel said, "I wish it would've kept going. It helped a lot of people.

"The inmates want help. They want to change their lives. When they get out of jail, a lot of them would follow up and keep going with the program."

Program participant Christian Lynn of Cambridge has been sober since May 2002 when he joined the support program.

"I knew if I continued using and drinking as I was, there was three things that could happen - jail, insane asylum or death. Parents are not supposed to bury their kids and that's where I thought I was headed," Lynn said.

Lynn, who had been drinking since age 12, had almost made it through the Veteran Administration's treatment program twice, but never completed it.

The stability and sobriety program helped him gain the freedom from drugs and alcohol that he desired.

"I was very lucky to get hooked up with Cheryl [Shanahan] and this group," Lynn noted. "They've given me a sense of peace, a sense of direction and good advice."

Shanahan is a staff member who worked with the Cambridge group.

According to the year-end report for the Minnesota Department of Health, there is a high risk for substance abuse and relapse after treatment for people in the five-county region.

"Adults with dual disorder are at exceptionally high risk for relapse, hospitalization, criminal activity and justice system involvement, which results in extreme social and economic costs to society," the report states.

Additional stability and sobriety program goals were to reintegrate clients with their family system and their community, gain knowledge and skills to meet their own social and emotional needs, access to transportation (many have lost their driver's license or lack the funds to buy and maintain a vehicle), childcare assistance, information on community resources, building affiliation with community institutions and resources and increase employment for those with mental illnesses.

Family education sessions focused on enhancing the relationship with the dual disorder client, building communication, healthy coping skills and mental health and sobriety skills.

Not only are clients missing the program, providers are as well.

Staff provided presentations to probation and corrections officers; chemical dependency and half-way house providers; regional, county and private mental health providers; health care; and alcohol and drug licensing agencies. Just over 760 participants attended the presentations.

According to the report, providers said that without the program the gaps will return and their own roles will become more difficult. They are convinced the program participants will acutely feel the loss.

Because of their mental illness, many find they don't fit in at traditional Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous programs. In some rare cases, clients attended individual sessions due to social phobia or anxiety disorders.

Lynn M. of North Branch, who has been sober for three years, said that she appreciated the mental health aspect of the program, which helped her get out on her own.

"I'm more apt to do the things I need to do to take care of me," she said. "There were days, weeks, I didn't want to go [to group], but I knew it was the best thing for me and I always got something out of it."

Tony Ward of Princeton said, "I liked the setting, the discussions we had. Our group became kinda' like a little family."

Ward has been sober for two years after using meth for roughly a decade.

"If I didn't go to it," Ward said of the sobriety group, "I'd probably be using right now."

"It got my life back together and I'm going down the right path. It helped me figure out things I couldn't figure out myself."

Isanti County

In Isanti County, 36 people attended the group that started in 2002. Two weekly groups were meeting at the Fish House in Cambridge, although they were originally held at the Westerberg Chiropractic Building until 2007.

Because Cambridge is the major regional center for mental health and chemical dependency services, the second group was designed to provide services to family members from all five counties.

The report states that the Cambridge group has maintained a tight bond with one another. The group is working on forming a peer support group, which will be monitored by Faye Stein-Smestad, a mental health social worker from Isanti County.

One member reported that she has lived in the community for more than 50 years and she found the stability and sobriety program was the one place she felt safe to talk about her 20-year meth addiction.

History of program

The Supports for Stability and Sobriety program came about with the closing of the Moose Lake Regional Treatment Center in the 1990s. Ongoing mental health services for people in rural areas became a concern and it was obvious that individual counties did not have the resources to do justice to a broad range of mental health and chemical health

services.

The Region 7E partnership was created by the five counties. Region 7E wrote the grant for the Supports for Stability and Sobriety and Rum River Recovery Plus provided the services for the program.

Peggy King served as the team leader/project coordinator.

King is working to develop a new program in Princeton this month through Recovery Plus and St. Cloud Hospital.

She also plans to have discussions with Mille Lacs County Jail to explore options for a treatment program for inmates.

As so often is the case, what was once a good, quality program has ended due to lack of funds.

"I'm looking for some place else that is similar," Lynn said. "It's a shame there's nothing similar to this program in the area, that I'm aware of."

Ward is hoping to start a similar program in the Princeton area.

King said the program is definitely warranted.

"I had seven calls already - the first day!" King added.

Editor's note: If people are interested in learning about comparable or upcoming programs, contact King at 763-286-6962 or Ward at 763-202-9385.