

Making strides in meeting Idaho's mental health needs

Region 2 Behavioral Health Board working on plan to expand services

MOSCOW — Efforts to expand behavioral health crisis services in north central Idaho represent a “huge first step” in addressing the area’s mental health needs, but one local official hopes they won’t be the last.

Latah County Commissioner Tom Lamar serves as vice-chairman of the Region 2 Behavioral Health Board, which covers a five-county region.

Working with area hospitals and law enforcement agencies, the board has spent the last few years developing a unique proposal for improving mental health crisis services across the region. The plan includes adding a total of 10 short-term crisis rooms at area hospitals, where individuals can come to recover and get treatment when they’re having behavioral health issues. The rooms will serve as an alternative to jails or emergency rooms.

The Idaho Legislature appropriated funding for this Regional Crisis Response proposal during the 2018 legislative session, along with two other standalone crisis centers in Pocatello and Canyon County.

Since then, Lamar said, the various stakeholders have had regular conference calls as they begin the process of moving the crisis response plan from a concept to reality.

“Right now we (the behavioral health board) are working out an agreement with the local Public Health office to manage the project for the entire region,” he said.

The goal is to have that contract signed by the end of May, although Carol Moehrle, director of the North Central Idaho Public Health District, said she’s still waiting for some information from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

Once the management contract is in place, Lamar said, Public Health will subcontract with the five area hospitals, as well as regional law enforcement agencies. The hospitals will provide the crisis rooms and treatment services, while the law enforcement agencies will provide security and transportation services.

State funding should be available as soon as the main contract is signed, he said. That will allow hospitals to do the remodeling needed to convert a room that might be suitable for someone who’s having a medical emergency to a room that is safe to use for someone who’s having behavioral health issues.

Training sessions are also planned for area law enforcement personnel, Lamar said, since they’re often the first point of contact for someone who’s having a crisis.

It will likely take several months to accomplish all this preparatory work. The behavioral health board had initially hoped to begin providing crisis services by October, he said, but now it’s looking like “it may be December. We need to be realistic.”

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These crisis services will be a welcomed addition to the region, Lamar said. However, “they’re not the only thing we need to do for treatment and recovery. I think once we do this, it will open the door to other steps we need to take.”

For example, he noted that a grass-roots group, Reclaim Idaho, sponsored a Medicaid ballot initiative earlier this year. The Secretary of State’s Office hasn’t certified the results yet, but the group believes it gathered enough signatures to qualify for the November ballot.

Should that initiative prevail, Lamar said, it would go a long way toward addressing many of the state’s behavioral health needs.

“If people can get preventative care, they won’t be in crisis as often,” he said.

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