

New crisis center provides third option to ER or jail

Site will help with mental health and drug or alcohol problems

Hospitals and local law enforcement agencies spend a lot of time helping people in crisis. People whose mental illness is flaring up. People who are suicidal. People who used drugs or alcohol, and now they're confused and angry.

The Pathways Community Crisis Center of Southwest Idaho opens its doors Tuesday to help those people. Many of its clients will arrive with police. And if it's anything like other centers in the state, the Boise center near Cole Road and Emerald Street will keep a lot of them from spending hours in the emergency room.

The Pathways center is the latest in a series of behavioral health crisis centers to open around Idaho, with state funding.

The first center opened in Idaho Falls three years ago, followed by Coeur d'Alene two years ago and Twin Falls last year.

"We have seen steady growth every month of every year," said Hailey Tyler, director of the Behavioral Health Crisis Center of East Idaho.

There were 764 admissions to Tyler's center between July and September this year. About half of those clients were having both mental health and substance abuse issues that put them in crisis. The average stay was 20 hours.

Tyler said the East Idaho center is usually able to hook people up with a mental health agency that can help them through recovery. But about 43 percent of its clients don't have health insurance, which makes long-term treatment "really difficult" to find, she said. "We see a whole lot more of the uninsured people coming back through the door," she said.

The center has managed to divert many patients away from emergency-room visits, she said. One night spent at a crisis center instead of an ER can save thousands of dollars for the patient, the hospital and/or the county.

Like the other centers, Pathways will take any adult who walks through the door.

The crisis center is only a short-term option. Patients can stay up to 23 hours and 59 minutes. Some will need a little more time — such as when they need to be hospitalized but no inpatient psychiatric beds are open yet — and will be discharged and re-admitted when they approach that 24-hour deadline.

"Our job is pretty much triage and stabilization, so we'll be referring them to ... community partners for longer-term care or resources that way," said Chris Christopher, director of business development for the Boise crisis center.

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by **Audrey Dutton**
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The center's staff of 30 will help make sure patients are taken care of temporarily, then guide them to more resources. Many people will be referred to walk-in clinics that treat mental illness and substance use disorders, Christopher said. For example, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's clinic at Fairview Avenue and Westgate Drive, or Omega Health Services on State Street at Ellens Ferry Drive could provide longer-term care, or patients who need more intensive care could be admitted to a hospital, he said.

With help from local donors and groups like Optum Idaho and the Eagle Scouts, the center is stocked with supplies: toiletries to help patients feel comfortable, and medical mats on sleeping platforms.

The center has space for 20 people — 10 men and 10 women.

Q: Who can get care at the crisis center?

A: The center is open to anyone 18 or older. You don't have to live in Boise. You don't even have to live in Idaho.

Q: Do I need insurance? What's the cost?

A: It's completely free. Having a Medicaid, Medicare or private insurance plan makes it easier to get longer-term treatment after you leave the crisis center, but you don't need insurance while you're there.

Q: Is the center run by the state?

A: No. Each of the crisis centers in Idaho are operated by local organizations that have experience managing mental health services. Pathways, for example, has been a mental health service provider in the Treasure Valley for more than 10 years under the name Pioneer Health Resources.

But the centers get their start with financial support from the state. Each center receives about \$1.5 million a year from the state for operations and a startup appropriation of \$200,000, according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. The centers then have two years to file a plan to become at least 50 percent financially self-sustaining, Christopher said.

Q: I'm out of meds. Does the center have doctors who can write me a prescription?

A: No. The center is staffed with nurses, counselors, social workers, case managers and peer-support specialists. It has no psychiatrists or psychiatric nurse practitioners on staff to prescribe medications. However, the crisis center can help you stay safe if you've gone off your medication or your medication isn't working right. They can connect you with providers to manage your prescriptions after you leave.

If you're bringing someone to the crisis center, bring their prescription bottles along so the staff knows what they're taking and keeps them on schedule with their medications.

Q: My friend is homeless, and it's cold outside. Can they stay at the crisis center?

A: The crisis center is not allowed to house people and isn't a homeless shelter. However, many people are homeless because of, or in addition to, mental illness and substance abuse. If your friend is dealing with those issues, the crisis center is a good place for them to go for help.

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Q: I live in Emmett. Will there ever be a center near me?

A: The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare asked in its request for the coming budget year for \$5.2 million to help open a center in the western Treasure Valley, and two more in parts of the state that currently have no crisis centers.

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