

Aspen Hope Center quickly begins fulfilling its mission

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ASPEN — The new Aspen Hope Center has offered more than a “Hopeline” since it opened its doors June 1. For some, it has provided a lifeline.

The Aspen Valley Medical Foundation founded the center to provide quick access to mental-health services, and proof of the need for such an effort quickly materialized, according to Kris Marsh, foundation executive director.

“Close to 60 calls in the first month I think is astounding,” she said.

In June, the center responded to 29 clients — people in need of either a referral or immediate help, and another 28 individuals who called because they were concerned about someone else, typically a friend or family member, Marsh said.

July’s numbers include 11 clients and 13 calls from individuals hoping to help someone else.

That means the center has fielded 81 calls in all, thus far.

Calls are taken 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by a trained staff of clinicians — two who hold master’s degrees in social work and one with a master’s degree in psychiatry. Referrals are made to local and private therapists or agencies, depending upon the needs of the caller.

The calls, Marsh said, have come from individuals who are suicidal or psychotic, or struggling with such challenges as depression, anxiousness, family problems and substance abuse or addiction.

“Whatever it is, we’re there to try to link them up with the correct resources — try to get them the help they need,” she said.

If a client is referred to a therapist or agency, the center follows up to make sure the individual has made contact and is getting help.

“It’s not just answering the phone,” Marsh said.

In a crisis situation, a team responds immediately, day or night, going to the distressed individual or meeting the person at the center’s offices, located at the Aspen Business Center. Their follow-up care may include daily counseling, with the cost picked up by the center.

The center handled several calls, and one crisis, on its first day of operation, according to Marsh. The first phone call came in at 8 a.m.

“There have been several cases where we have saved lives, and that has been in the first month, no question,” she said.

The center is a response to recommendations that came out of a research study commissioned by the medical foundation last year, conducted by the University of Colorado Denver Depression Center. The study assessed mental-health needs in Aspen and Pitkin County and concluded a central access point to help should be a priority.

“We’re providing that safety net, so people aren’t falling through the cracks,” said Marsh, who hopes the Aspen Hope Center becomes a model for other small communities.

The center, which began hiring staffers in March, has a \$200,000 budget this year, including \$100,000 from the medical foundation.

A fundraiser is planned in September, and the foundation is seeking philanthropic support from individuals and foundations, as well. The goal is to see the center evolve into an independent nonprofit entity.

“If we can keep making this work, it will be something I’ll always be happy about,” Marsh said.

The Aspen Hopeline number is 925-5858. Online, go to www.AspenHopeCenter.org for more information.

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