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Seeking help in rural Nebraska

BY JONNIE TATE FINN | Lincoln Journal Star

Mental health professionals are scarce in rural Nebraska counties, where clergy sometimes pick up the slack and some are reluctant to seek help.

Audrey Barkhurst just needed someone to talk to.

A family member was suffering from bipolar disorder and Barkhurst wasn't sure where to turn for guidance and counseling.

"I don't like to talk about it with a lot of people," said Barkhurst of Weeping Water. "Sometimes the subject is hard for me."

Finding a behavioral health care professional in rural areas can be tricky, especially if, like Barkhurst, you want someone close to home with reasonable rates.

"I'm a very private person," Barkhurst said. "I'm not looking for sympathy from anyone. I want to feel comfortable talking with someone."

She turned to Jim McReynolds, a licensed mental health practitioner and senior pastor at First Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, in Weeping Water. When he's not at the pulpit, McReynolds offers what he calls "pastoral psychotherapy" free to individuals and groups seeking help at the church.

"People in rural areas are more willing to seek help from clergy, because they expect their pastors to be able to do counseling. We're most people's first choice," said McReynolds, who is also on the state board of directors for the Mental Health Association of Nebraska.

"There's a stigma in rural areas when it comes to mental health," McReynolds said. "What will other people think of them if they get help? They think, 'People like us don't get mentally ill.' Plus, the cost of care and the distance to drive to get help can be more burdensome for them."

Many agree that, when it comes to mental health, rural areas lack needed professionals, even with the presence of organizations such as Blue Valley Mental Health, which provides 13 mental health and substance abuse programs in 15 counties in Southeast Nebraska.

"Given that 88 out of Nebraska's 93 counties are designated by the federal government as having shortages of mental health care providers — and in 21 counties there aren't any mental health care providers at all — it's



First Christian Church Minister James McReynolds leads a support group using scripture called Recovery Group on Wednesday night in the church's basement in Weeping Water. As a licensed psychologist and an ordained minister, McReynolds also offers counseling at the church's Family Guidance Counseling Center.

a problem of great concern,” said Mark DeKraai, senior researcher at the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center.

In an effort to combat the problem, Sen. Dennis Byars of Beatrice this year introduced LB1220, the Rural Behavioral Health Training and Placement Program Act.

The program would be run by the University of Nebraska Medical Center and addresses the shortages by placing behavioral health graduate students in clinics in underserved rural and urban areas.

Byars said a similar program exists but most of the funding to run the \$277,262 program will be cut this year.

Last year, Byars said these programs provided 5,500 patient visits for families and children in rural communities.

By providing these services in rural Nebraska, he said graduate students are more likely to stay and practice professionally in those communities.

“A program like this is needed because Nebraska has very sparse areas that aren’t receiving behavioral health services,” Byars said. “It’s extremely important to get behavioral health professionals where they are needed.”

But another study suggests that even if mental health care were widely available, rural residents needing help may not seek it.

Nineteen percent of last year’s 2,851 Nebraska Rural Poll respondents said they were comfortable discussing personal problems with a substance abuse counselor, while 32 percent were comfortable with a mental health professional. That compares with 82 percent who were comfortable talking to a family member and 79 percent to a close friend.

“We had hoped people would say, ‘Sure, if I have a mental health problem, I’ll choose to go to a mental health professional,’” said Alan Tomkins, director of the NU Public Policy Center.

“Unfortunately, the survey doesn’t tell us whether people are more likely to speak to a friend or family member because they are more comfortable with friends than behavioral health providers or because they don’t trust or are unfamiliar with behavioral health providers.”

Tomkins said the results probably reflect a lack of familiarity with behavior health professionals.

“People don’t have a lot of experience with mental health professionals, but that’s not saying they would not ever go to them,” he said. “They’re not going to them because there’s just no mental health professional in that rural area. So they’re used to speaking with people in the community.”

The poll has been conducted annually for 10 years in an effort to understand rural Nebraskans’ perceptions of their individual well-being.

The findings will aid efforts to better serve rural areas, where mental health and substance abuse services often aren’t easily accessible, Tomkins said.

“Nearly half of all Americans will come face-to-face with mental health issues. We think it’s very important to have mental health services available in these communities,” he said. “The challenge is how we provide services in a consumer-friendly manner. We think the faith-based and community-based organizations can play a

role.”

McReynolds’ pastoral work in Weeping Water began last summer and he established the Family Guidance Counseling Center through his church last fall. Since then he’s helped more than 20 people with mental health issues and leads an average of about eight, 50-minute sessions each week.

“First, we screen people to see if we are the appropriate source for mental health care,” said McReynolds, whose office doesn’t treat serious mental illness. He will provide five individual sessions, then will offer referrals for further care.

McReynolds also leads the Recovery Group, a support group for people with any kind of illness or problem, whether mental, emotional, physical or spiritual.

“We call it the Recovery Group because then it’s not too scary,” McReynolds said. “Many rural people don’t understand about mental health, and we don’t want them to shy away from group therapy because it’s called ‘Bipolar Group’.”

But McReynolds cautions people against turning to clergy exclusively for counseling on mental health issues.

“Statistics show that most people come to a clergy person when having a problem,” he said. “Most (clergy) are not trained nor do they know which professional they should refer.”

Marilyn Mecham, executive of Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska, said it’s natural for people — especially in small towns — to turn to clergy for counseling. She said IMN encourages clergy to refer people needing mental health counseling to licensed behavioral health care workers.

Another source for help is the Nebraska Rural Response Hotline, a program that’s been around for 20 years and links rural callers dealing with stress, depression and other mental health issues with appropriate professionals.

The hot line is sponsored by the Farm Crisis Response Council of IMN and takes an average of 4,000 calls each year. Mecham said callers can request vouchers for a free session of mental-health counseling.

“One reason the hotline is so successful is because it’s supported by the church,” she said. “The faith community brings a sense of trust and confidentiality — two key things when dealing with mental health in rural areas, because, as people who live there know, confidentiality isn’t synonymous with small-town living.”

For Barkhurst, talking with McReynolds is easy and comforting.

“He’s very confidential,” she said. “You can tell him anything and he won’t go off and tell everyone about your problem.

“He makes me feel comfortable — his smile, his kindness. He has such a soft-spoken voice, like he really cares about you, like it comes from the heart.”

McReynolds said it’s his goal to continue offering confidential, affordable and convenient faith-based mental health care.

“There is a stigma of the mentally ill and there is a lack of care in rural areas. And we’d like to be a small part of care that is available.”

If you need help

Blue Valley Mental Health provides 13 mental health and substance abuse programs in these 15 counties: Butler, Fillmore, Gage, Jefferson, Johnson, Nemaha, Otoe, Pawnee, Polk, Richardson, Saline, Saunders, Seward, Thayer and York. For more information, call the Beatrice office at (402) 228-3386.

Nebraska Rural Response Hotline: Rural residents can call the hotline, which is answered by a staff member who can respond to callers dealing with stress, depression and other mental health issues through the COMHT (Counseling, Outreach and Mental Health Therapy) Program. No-cost vouchers for participating mental health care practitioners are also available. For more information, call (800) 464-0258.

Family Guidance in Weeping Water: The Family Guidance Counseling Center is a ministry of the First Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, in Weeping Water. For information, call (402) 267-5216.

211: For 24/7 information on various organizations, government agencies and general human service information, dial 211. You'll speak confidentially to certified referral specialists trained in assessing needs and connecting callers with appropriate services.

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