

Community places high demand on Center for Hope

BY SARA B. HANSEN • SaraHansen@coloradoan.com • March 31, 2010

When the Sister Mary Alice Murphy Center for Hope opened a year ago, staff and administrators anticipated serving 30-35 people per day.

But the center, which had been in the works for more than seven years, opened as the worst of the recession hit Northern Colorado, and the center instead has averaged 80 clients per day, said Gordan Thibedeau, president and CEO of United Way of Larimer County.

"The good news was we opened when we did, but the bad news was the center was needed as desperately as it was," Thibedeau said.

The center, located at 242 Conifer St. in Fort Collins, is a resource center for the homeless or those on the brink of homelessness. During its first year, the center served more than 3,000 individuals.

It was developed to help people with their immediate needs while addressing the underlying causes of their crisis to help them work toward self-sufficiency. The center is managed by Larimer Center for Mental Health and provides services such as counseling, housing assistance, employment resources, parenting support services and more.

"Our goal was to create a one-stop shop for people who are struggling," Thibedeau said.

Zach Penland, center program director, said while the economy played a huge role, it isn't the only reason the center has seen such high demand for its services.

"We discovered there's a higher level of poverty and homelessness in Larimer County than anyone realized," he said. "They're what we call the hidden homeless. There's a huge group that's not yet homeless but on the verge of homelessness. These folks are one paycheck, one car repair, one medical bill away from losing their place. We knew they were out there, but it's a tough population to pin down."

The center opened with three full-time staff members and one half-time staff member. Now it has six full-time staff members.

When the 10,000-square-foot building opened, it seemed large, Penland said. In the past year, it's been remodeled once to add more office space, and staff is already preparing for a second remodel to add more office space.

Daniel Covey, one of the center's case managers, said although the demand for services has been overwhelming, the center has been able to work with people and help them improve their lives.

Many of the people who come to the center are discouraged and feel they have no options, he said. Center staff is able to help them get connected to sources that can help with housing assistance, job placement and more.

"I'm very grateful to be a part of this," he said. "It's really a beautiful thing to be part of an organization that is dedicated to helping people reach self-sufficiency."

Emily Dawson Petersen, development and marketing director for the Larimer Center for Mental Health, which manages the center, said it's been affirming to see the number of families that have accessed the center's services.

"It disproves that myth that the homeless are single men with alcohol problems," she said. "So many of the homeless or near homeless are young families who have been working as hard as they can to maintain stability."

In the coming year, Thibedeau would like to see the center add more health services.

Covey wants to see more people contact the center for help sooner rather than wait until they are in a crisis.

"I'd like to see them come in for help in figuring out how to decrease their spending rather than wait until they need rent assistance," he said. "We want to be able to help them budget a bit better so they can be self-sufficient."

And Penland wants to continue to expand.

"We've got our feet under us," Penland said. "Now it's time for us to start improving the services we have here and then expanding them whenever possible."



Alison Dawson, left, with the Disabled Resource Services at the Sister Mary Alice Murphy Center for Hope, pets Duke, a 3-year-old beagle who is a service dog for Pachi Hergert, rear, during the one-year anniversary celebration of the center. (V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan)



MURPHY

VISITOR SNAPSHOT

- > Average age: 28
 - > Actually homeless 43 percent.
 - > Male: 53 percent
 - > Female: 47 percent
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BY THE NUMBERS

During its first year, the Sister Mary Alice Murphy Center for Hope:

- > Helped 3,371 individuals
 - > Had 19,046 visits to the center
 - > Processed 1,048 loads of laundry
 - > Provided 2,491 showers
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