

Center for Mental Health plans to expand Early Childhood program with grant funds

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The Center for Mental Health was awarded \$88,161 to extend support for its Early Childhood program.

The grant was bestowed by the Colorado Department of Human Services and will be used to continue helping young children and their families with mental health consultations and treatments throughout Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose and Ouray counties, the Center’s press release stated.

The funding offers more opportunity for service within the Center, such as providing additional staffing, an extension that will allow it to support more children, families and sites in the community.

Laura Byard, licensed professional counselor and clinical director for the Center, noted that support from the Center for Mental Health isn’t limited to only child-specific establishments, but to any “site” that wants to incorporate a skill set or training that would support children

and their families.

The Center currently serves 17 sites as it works closely with its Early Childhood program board and the involved communities.

Service is based on the needs of the site, which includes:

Coaching

Providing education

Structured assessment of the area or classroom

Developing quiet spaces or reading materials for children

Transition coaching - from classrooms, activities, etc.

“Our childcare sites are already so amazing,” said Byard. “We really look at what things are going well for a child and what areas they would like to make some changes.”

The program is solution-based, the clinical director said. If “normal” solutions don’t work, the Center sends staff who can provide alternative solutions or assess the cause of the behavior.

The Center is less diagnostic and more behavioral-based, focusing on how disruptive behaviors in children can be identified and resolved.

Byard explained there are behaviors normally expected in classrooms with small children. The Center staff can step in when a child begins exhibiting behaviors not typically expected that can’t be redirected with normal strategies.

The Center is prepared to support childcare sites in a myriad of ways, whether the site needs the center to call a parent to pick up a child or if they believe the child needs additional support.

The pandemic hit pause for many people and businesses this past year, but it offered the Center the opportunity to include virtual services, a benefit which expanded the range of care staff could provide.

“[It] seems kind of counterintuitive when you’re working with a classroom and childcare, but it actually worked really well because we were able to support a classroom teacher who needed some ideas observed through a laptop or to meet with a family in their home,” said Byard.

The new implementation helped Center staff particularly in rural communities where homes and sites are more spread out. COVID prevented staff from visiting in person, but moving to virtual services also reduced travel time that was previously lost.

Although mask and stay-at-home orders are lifted, Byard expects the Early Childhood program to remain hybrid going forward.

“It works so well and allows us to provide support for and expand our support to other daycare centers that we normally haven’t been able to fit in, so that’s really one of the really nice things that has happened,” she said.

The program exists to provide access for all children in the community, regardless of income level. Because the program is funded through the grant, the Center requires no form of payment from anyone it assists, even for in-home providers.

Byard recognized the challenges some households have had in accessing the internet, adding that the Center would focus on solutions to problems such as these, such as communicating over the phone.

If children or families needs further mental health treatment, the Center will refer and connect them with a provider for assistance. Anyone is welcome to request assistance, the clinical director emphasized. The program’s goal is to not only support the child, but also assist the family and any adult in the child’s life in whatever they need to support the child successfully.

Byard added that the Center holds respect and admiration for the work childcare services provide and the program exists to offer additional support for what they already do.

“I’m very excited to be able to continue to offer these services and to be able to outreach our rural communities. Some of our communities only have one or two daycare centers, so helping families and helping both sides be successful is just really amazing work to get to do.”

Cassie Knust is a staff writer for the Montrose Daily Press.