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## Drop-in centers provide stop-gap, support to patients with mental illness

By JODI HAUSEN Chronicle Staff Writer Jan 31, 2010



NICK WOLCOTT/CHRONICLE Roy Moor, a volunteer at Bozeman's drop-in center, hangs out and talks with other visitors on Thursday.

**LIVINGSTON** — Just before Christmas last year, a family gathered here to celebrate the season, as so many families do.

They made music, ate fudge and read poetry aloud.

But the two-dozen or so folks who gathered at Peer Solutions Drop-In Center on that typically windy Livingston night were no ordinary family. Their bonds, they'd argue, may be stronger than blood, built through their shared affliction of mental illness.

Drop-in centers like Peer Solutions and Bozeman's Open Arms are places where people struggling with mental illness and substance abuse come together to support each other.

Run under the auspices of the county mental health centers, there are no psychiatrists, or case managers here — just people with mental illness helping each other in ways that people devoid of psychological issues can't.

"We're all going through something, and you form that bond," said Jim Hajny, a peer counselor and the paid coordinator of the Livingston center. "If you're bipolar and cycling through the ups and downs, you can go to the center and people understand because we've all been there."

'I'm a peer'

The drop-in centers are completely free and everyone is welcome, providing they are not disruptive. The centers don't supply medications or therapy. What they do provide is support — a place where clients feel safe, where they feel comfortable sharing their feelings with each other because they feel understood, not judged.

That's due in large part to the fact that they're both run by high-functioning people with mental illness, substance abuse issues or both.

"I'm just like everyone else who comes in," said Hajny, who has suffered with depression and alcoholism. "I'm there as a facilitator, but I'm living it, too. I'm sharing it, too. We're all equals in the room. That's really what we're all about."

The centers are places, an Open Arms client said, where "people having problems help people having problems."

John Watson manages Open Arms. He never imagined he would wind up coordinating a mental health facility.

Watson has suffered with severe, panic attacks, "worse than death," he said. "You just want to die."

To ease the anxiety, he self-medicated with alcohol. He even considered suicide.

But now Watson gets the support he needs and helps others get it as well, he said.

Neither he nor Hajny are trained counselors or therapists. They are in their positions because they understand, and they understand because they've been there, they said.

"This was not my chosen field," Watson said. "I have found what I was supposed to be doing. I'm a peer."

### Dollars and sense

The centers work hand in hand with paid therapeutic services. But their existence takes a little of the pressure off a strained state mental health system.

In Gallatin County, the number of people needing mental health crisis services has jumped at least 20 percent in the past year, Gallatin Mental Health Center Director Scott Malloy said. The number of people seeking help on a non-crisis basis has also increased, from about six per week to about nine.

Another indicator of the growing need is the increased demand for a state program that helps people pay for therapy and psychiatric drugs.

In the first seven months of 2009, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services saw enrollment in that program increase from 100 to 250 patients each month, said Chuck Council, a DPHHS spokesperson.

Last fall, the department estimated money for that program would be exhausted three months before this fiscal year ends. So in hopes of stretching existing dollars, the state this month shifted its priority to people in crisis, recently discharged from the state hospital or homeless.

As a result, the drop-in centers are serving a key role for people who do not fit the new criteria, Hajny said.

"We're helping people stabilize themselves so hopefully they're not having to use more expensive services like jails and hospitals," he said.

Most of the clients are jobless or work for minimum wage, Watson said. Some are or have been homeless and many have been incarcerated. They can't afford to pay for mental health services out of pocket.

"We're a bridge," Watson said.

And compared to other mental-health services, the drop-in centers are a bargain.

The annual budget for the Livingston drop-in center, funded with an \$85,000 state grant, is about equal to the cost of housing one person in the Montana State Hospital in Warm Springs for six months, Hajny said.

Just last month it counted nearly 300 visits, up from 35 per month when it opened in the fall of 2008, Park County Mental Health Director John Beck said.

Bozeman's Open Arms sees about 500 visitors monthly, Watson said. To cover costs, it gets about \$70,000 in state grant money and was just awarded an additional \$20,000 for this and next fiscal year. The additional money may go to buy a van, expand hours to include Sundays or hire a fourth peer counselor.

Both centers' grants are funded through June 2011.

### Bridging a gap

On any given day when the centers are open, people wander in and out. Some are in crisis. Some are intoxicated. Others are on drugs. Some are homeless.

Clients participate in support groups, informal chats or use the books, videos and computers. Programs like jam sessions, Livingston's open-mike nights and songwriting groups provide creative outlets.

"It's a place I can come and relax," said Lee Rhodes, who takes medications for his psychoses and depression. "It's safe. It's a place where I can learn more about my mental illness and how to cope with it. I hang out with good people and try to help everybody else."

Sometimes the peers have to be firm.

One regular client was banned last week after her manic behavior, including strolling in at one point with a blaring radio, proved too disruptive. The rules dictate no unruly behavior.

"It gets hairy sometimes," Watson said. "But that's what we're here for. There are no endings here. If you fail the second time, there's a third time. There's always another chance."

Soft-spoken Tommy Foster sat at a table in Open Arms, clad in coveralls, watching the disruptive woman's struggles that day.

Homeless for 15 years, Foster lived in a storage unit in Seattle for awhile. He collected and sold trash to fund his drug habit, he said. He didn't mind it, he said, "but I was just being a drug addict."

Now Foster has a place to live and is off drugs but he doesn't have a job. Just dealing with his illness and addictions is a full-time job, he said to nods of agreement from other peers.

Foster appreciates the personal interactions Open Arms provides.

"I think it's the social thing that happens here that's the magic," he said. "This is a place where I can go and not feel like I'll be ostracized. If this place weren't here, I wouldn't find myself going out and trying to interact with people."

Both centers also ask clients to contribute back to their communities, working at soup kitchens, for example, where some of them also get their meals, and clearing road trash. Service is an important component to recovery, Hajny says.

"No matter how you're doing in your life, there's always someone else who could use your help," he said. "That's the point of recovery."

Participating in the programs helps build self-esteem, confidence and trust, he added.

For Roy Moor, who has bipolar disorder, the center helps him feel empowered.

"It's helped me to grow in body, soul and spirit," he said. "I'm thankful for the illness because it's made me who I am today — caring and empathetic and I can relate to everyone pretty well."

'Family of my choosing'

Just before Christmas, the open-mike night in Livingston gave that center's community a chance to perform. Such occasions give participants "a lot of validation," said Hajny, who emceed December's event, punctuating the performances with jokes about mental illness that should only be told by those who live with it.

"I got the blues for Christmas," one performer said, introducing his next number.

"At least you got something," his partner on stage retorted, eliciting crowd guffaws.

Peers and clients at both centers emphasized the power of laughter.

“We have to laugh at ourselves,” said one Livingston client, Angie, who declined to give her last name. “It’s the best medicine.”

For nearly two hours, the Livingston crew lounged on couches and overstuffed chairs, and listened to the shows. At the end, Angie shared a few thoughts.

“This is going to be my first Christmas where I’m not in the hospital, I’m not drunk and I’m not using,” she said. “I’m not with my family, but you know what? I am. I’m with the family of my choosing.

“There’s not words to express, to just walk in here everyday and see and belong and know, really know, that I’m loved. I questioned that with my blood family. But with you guys, there’s no question that when I’m not here, I’m missed. And I miss you guys when I don’t see you.

“But that’s not codependency,” she joked. “I have enough problems.”

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**BOZEMAN:** Open Arms Drop-In Center, 300 N. Willson Ave., suite 802H; 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Friday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. Phone: 522-7357 ext. 47.

**LIVINGSTON:** Peer Solutions Drop-In Center, 104 W. Clark St.; 2 to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday; special events on Fridays. Phone: 222-3332.

**ONLINE:** Information on mental health services in Gallatin and Park counties is available at [www.wmmhc.net](http://www.wmmhc.net).

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