

Montgomery Advertiser

Need for mental health services increase

More seeking help but lack of beds, service options a concern

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Nancy Thomas, left, executive director of clinical services, and therapist Christy Holding talk at Samaritan Counseling Center. / Amanda Sowards/ADVERTISER

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Mental-health RESOURCES

Montgomery Area Mental Health

Authority

24-hour emergency

services: 279-7830

Toll free: 877-279-7830

Deaf interpreter: 344-

271-2855

**Samaritan
Counseling Center**

262-7787

**Mental Health
America in
Montgomery**

262-5500

National Alliance on Mental Illness

396-4797

**Crossbridge
Behavioral Health**

286-3116

More

Clinics that provide mental health care are seeing an increase in people seeking help, and many people seem to be turning to affordable alternatives.

Those alternatives include Samaritan Counseling Center, which provides licensed therapists, and Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority, which has licensed psychiatrists.

Some mental health care providers said the increase is at least in part because of a weak economy in which people are struggling to find jobs.

“You have a whole generation of people having trouble finding jobs that will support them,” said Nancy Thomas, Samaritan’s executive director of clinical services.

Samaritan saw about a 15 percent increase in new clients in 2013 compared with 2012, Thomas said.

Henry Parker, executive director of MAMHA, said he did not have exact numbers, but he estimated the authority currently is taking in 45 to 50 new patients a week compared with 20 to 25 a week two years ago.

Crossbridge Behavioral Health, a psychiatric facility run by Baptist Health, also has seen a rise, with about a 15 percent increase this year compared with last year, Baptist spokesman Tommy McKinnon said.

Mental health care providers also pointed to the limited mental health services available in Montgomery and throughout Alabama.

The state's Department of Mental Health closed Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in August 2012 as part of a move toward more community-based care.

The MAMHA moved into the building in 2013, and although Parker said the authority offers services that are as good or better than those provided at Greil, he concedes there are a lack of options in the area.

"I will be the first to admit we need more mental health services in the tri-county area," Parker said.

What is available

Samaritan is a nonprofit that has been around since 1999 and offers high-quality therapists with flexible payment options, Thomas said. While the center is faith-based, people of all faiths are welcome, she said.

"We do not proselytize," Thomas said.

The center provides help with issues such as anxiety and depression but also offers marriage and family counseling, premarital counseling and health counseling.

Thomas and therapist Christy Holding said part of the reason for the increase could just be modern life, including the pressures created by technology.

Social media, for instance, can be a tool for bullying and in many cases can create situations for children that the parents do not know how to handle, they said.

Holding said more awareness of the benefits of counseling also is contributing to an increase in new clients. Still, she said, not everyone who could use the help is receiving it.

"It is hard to get care, and I think there is still a stigma about coming to counseling. A lot of people could be helped," Holding said.

One barrier could be in the process of changing, Thomas said.

The Affordable Care Act requires insurance companies to cover mental health and substance abuse disorders equal to their coverage of physical care.

Thomas said that as of now, there still are too many people who are uninsured or underinsured when it comes to mental health care.

The therapists at Samaritan cannot prescribe medication, although the clinic sometimes can work with a family doctor to provide medication to those who need it.

The center treats close to 8,000 people a year.

Other cases

Many people who require inpatient psychiatric care go to the MAMHA, a nonprofit that Parker said is the “safety net” for those in the area with insufficient insurance coverage.

In addition to the Montgomery location, the MAMHA has locations in Prattville, Wetumpka and Hayneville that provide therapy and drug counseling.

The center has 40 beds for people who have been determined to be in crisis. Parker said he often has to figure out other ways to accommodate patients.

“I used to look forward to Fridays. Now I dread them because I know I’m going to have some people committed that I have got to move,” Parker said.

Often, he said, he will have to buy a bed from Hill Crest Behavioral Health in Birmingham or Bullock County Hospital. That puts a strain on the authority’s budget.

“It is a juggling act because funding is not going up,” Parker said. “The funding stays the same, and we have more and more people to take care of on the same dollar.”

Some patients are sent to group homes in Montgomery, Autauga, Elmore and Lowndes counties. Others are housed at 50 scattered-site apartments in the area, Parker said. All told, the authority provides 160 beds, he added.

There currently are no vacancies at the group homes, he said. There are two vacancies at the apartments, but those are only available to people who meet the U.S. Housing and Urban Development definition of chronically homeless.

“It is up to me to find a place to treat them one way or another,” Parker said.

Crossbridge, meanwhile, treats adult and geriatric patients but does not provide primary substance abuse treatment.

Common diagnoses at the center include depression, psychosis, bipolar disorder and dementia, McKinnon said.

Like other facilities, Crossbridge provides short-term care, with patients returning to their homes and following up privately with psychiatrists or with MAMHA, McKinnon said.

The toll

The economic crisis has taken a toll in a lot of ways, including in the funding available to nonprofits.

“With our funding crisis all across government, everything suffers,” Thomas said. “We are just trying to do the best we can with what we have got.”

This is making therapists work harder to handle the increased intake. Parker said one way the MAMHA has handled the increase is to have therapists on a rotation to handle the new patients as they come in while the other therapists treat existing patients.

Holding pointed out that one of the things she stresses to people who come into the clinic is the importance of sufficient rest to mental health.

“As much as you want to give and give, you have to practice what you preach to some extent,” she said.