

Richmont counseling program expands

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By:

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As a professional counselor and a counseling professor at Richmont Graduate University, Jana Pressley always was bothered that many people who need counseling don't access it because of the expense.

Counseling sessions can cost more than \$50 for those paying out of pocket, and insurance deductibles and co-payments can put mental health therapy out of reach for many low-income residents, she said.

"We felt like a lot of people were falling through the cracks," Mrs. Pressley said. "It's a social justice issue. Counseling should be available to anyone despite their financial status. It shouldn't be a luxury for people who can afford it."

So four years ago she decided to open the Community Counseling Center through Richmont to offer low-cost counseling to the poor, uninsured and underinsured in the Chattanooga area.

Today, Mrs. Pressley barely can keep up with demand for the center's services.

Located in a small white house off Oak Street downtown, her staff sees between 80 and 100 clients per week, and the center is a crucial training ground for graduate students looking to sharpen their therapy skills at Richmont's Chattanooga campus, she said.

"We have grown so much," Mrs. Pressley said. "The word has really gotten out."

Clients at the center, which offers counseling from a Christian perspective, are charged using a sliding scale anywhere from \$5 to \$20 per session, she said.

Only 15 percent of the center's operations are covered by appointment fees, Mrs. Pressley said. Most of its funding is raised through private donors and churches, and fundraising has been challenging in the recession.

"The recession has increased our client load and decreased our funding at the same time," she said.

The center employs two full-time and one part-time professional counselors and four graduate counseling students. Some of the counselors specialize in marriage and family issues, adolescent and childhood trauma and parent/child interactions, said Michelle Westenhaver, a graduate of Richmont and a full-time counselor at the center.

But all counselors at the center are trained to address an array of issues from depression and anxiety to sexual abuse, Ms. Westenhaver said.

Social workers and school counselors refer some people to the center who otherwise could not afford counseling, she said. Also, churches that either don't offer counseling services or don't have licensed professional counselors on staff are sending their members, Ms. Westenhaver said.

"It's a gap we are trying to fill in the community," she said.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY

Richmont Graduate University recently changed its name from Psychological Studies Institute. The school offers a master's degree in professional counseling and a master's in marriage and family therapy. Between 60 and 70 students attend class at its Chattanooga campus each year. Richmont, a Christian university, also has a campus in Atlanta.

Source: Richmont Graduate University

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