

Chattanooga: Economic stress fuels demand for counseling

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By:
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Demand for low-cost counseling is rising as families struggle through the uncertainty of the stock market meltdown and increasing unemployment, the founder of a local counseling center said.

The economic downturn in the last year has created economic stress, which often translates to family stress, Dr. Jana Pressley of the Richmond Community Counseling Center said.

The waiting list for her organization's services has risen from zero to 15.

"Our clientele for the most part have already been somewhat economically stressed," said Dr. Pressley, who noted that the increase could be attributed to the economy, people hearing about the new center, a growing list of referrals or a combination of the three.

A national survey by the Pew Research Center showed more full- and part-time workers say any one of the following things is likely to happen over the next 12 months — a layoff, a reduction in pay, a reduction or elimination of health benefits, or their employer going out of business or moving — than a year ago. In February, 44 percent felt job stress, compare to 35 percent in January 2008, the Pew survey showed.

At the Partnership for Families, Children and Adults, the number of clients requesting help hasn't increased, but more are asking for fee reductions. Fees are set on a sliding scale, based on ability to pay, said spokeswoman Holly Ashley.

"Due to job losses and layoffs, their household income has decreased, so now they need a lower rate," she said.

Richmont was established as Psychological Studies Institute Community Counseling Center in 2005. It occupies the same McCallie Avenue campus as CBI Counseling Center, a practice in existence for many years which largely serves clients covered by private insurance.

Dr. Pressley said her center's target population is "pretty broad" but mostly includes the uninsured, underinsured and people who have insurance without mental health coverage.

"I founded (it) to be an additional resource so that our organization, in theory, could serve anyone who came to us," she said. "Our mission for existence is not to turn anyone away."

Contributions from foundations, churches and individuals allows the center to charge fees no higher than \$20, she said. Before the end of the year, the center will need to boost its financial partnerships, she said.

The center has a Christian world view, its director said, "but respectfully meets people where they are."

"We take that on a case by case basis, depending on the comfort level of the client," Dr. Pressley said. "We ask and want to

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know how much of (their) faith (they) want to be part of the discussion. That's important for people to know when they come in."

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