

Academy proud of progress with patients over past year  
by By Philip D. Brown  
08.05.11 - 12:01 am



If the proof is in the pudding for the baker, it is in the outcomes for the mental health services provider - and Sandhills Alternative Academy touted the successful outcomes it's produced to the county earlier this week.

Of eight consumers it has served thus far this year, seven have been successfully reinstated to school, and none have been put into therapeutic foster care, which costs the state and federal governments through Medicaid payments.

At Monday evening's meeting of the county commissioners, several representatives from the Academy appeared to offer the board an update on its programs - and make the case it is saving taxpayer green by keeping youth with profound emotional and developmental disabilities out of state care.

Academy President Pam Easterling began the presentation by laying out an organizational chart, and informing commissioners the outfit employs more than 30 people, "and that is not including the various people we contract with throughout the county."

She explained many in the community know about the rope course the Academy built at Big Pines Retreat, but questioned whether many in the community were aware of the purpose of it or what the services the company provides.

"The consumers we serve have been diagnosed with a mental health disability," Easterling told commissioners. "Most of the children we serve have been adjudicated and they're out of school for some period of time."

Producing a successful outcome, Academy Quality Manager Dan Wright explained Tuesday, involves getting these kids back on track to a productive life and keeping them out of therapeutic foster care or incarceration.

In the year since the company added Intensive In-Home Services to its existing Day Therapy, offered Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., the outcomes have been satisfying, he explained. In addition to these services, the Academy also offers Targeted Case Management, Outpatient Therapy and Substance Abuse Treatment, or SAIOP.

“When we have them in Day Treatment, that’s two to six hours a day we’re with them, but we provide mental health services for individuals that need assistance in maintaining appropriate behavior, which would be social skills ...” Wright explained the necessity of treating the patient in the family setting, where they will eventually have to sink or swim. “Our main goal is to minimize the symptoms so that individual can be transitioned back to the school system, and receive the proper education they will need to succeed in society.”

From Jan. 1 to June 30, none of the Academy’s patients were moved out of the home to therapeutic foster care, and, perhaps even more impressively, all but one has made a successful transition back into school. On top of these figures, Wright said the Department of Social Services hasn’t been involved in any of their students’ homes.

“One of our consumers did have a crisis, and was in need of a higher level of services than we offer,” Wright explained.

When In-Home services are offered, it is a qualified professional such as April Cowick who is in the home working with the family.

“One of the reasons we offer Intensive In-Home services is to actually get into the home and see the full side of what’s going on in that consumer’s life that is leading to the problems,” she explained. “We need to know where those behaviors are coming from, because we saw it in day treatment but you don’t really know what’s going on in a kid’s life until you get in the home and see what they’re dealing with on a day-to-day basis.”

Cowick said the true proof of their work is in its impact on the lives of those they provide services for, and illustrated the program’s success with a story about a student who suffered an unexpected death in the family while receiving services, but didn’t let that stop his transition back to school and a normal life.

“The real breakthrough for he and his family didn’t come until we started providing intensive in-home services, and could actually get in there and see what the problems were,” she explained.

Wright explained the services are intended to “instill family dynamics.”

“When we’re with them for six hours a day providing services,” Wright said. “Everything we go through in those six hours a day working on certain goals, but it’s different to get those goals reinforced in the home.”

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