

Allegan County Community Mental Health Services Partners with Horizons Circle of Friends to Serve an Important Need in Allegan County

By Sean Maitner

When you are first diagnosed with a serious mental illness it can cause a loneliness that makes you feel as if you are the last person in the world, adrift in a sea of confusion. Some people become withdrawn and socially isolated. In this solitaire state of mind it is easy to forget that you are not alone. Millions of American's and many more worldwide suffer from mental illness. But recovery is possible, with the proper tools. One of the most important of these tools is peer support.

To offer such an important support service as "peer support" in Allegan County, Allegan County Community Mental Health Services (ACCMHS) contracts with Horizon Circle of Friends, a private non-profit program, for the purchase of their peer-operated services. Importantly, county taxpayers are to thank for this opportunity to serve those in need in our county, because federal, state and local tax dollars are used by ACCMHS to pay for these Horizon contracted services.

Through this contract, Horizon Circle of Friends operates an Allegan County drop-in center for adults with serious mental illness. Their drop-in center is open Monday's, Wednesday's, and Friday's from 8:00am until 2:00 pm. During these times persons with mental illness from all over the county gather to drink coffee, relax and be around others who have the same cares and concerns.

Founded in May of 2000, Horizon's has been a haven for those who rely on the support of others to cope with mental illness. Run by a board made up of persons with serious mental illness, the organization strives to offer its members companionship and understanding in an unstructured and positive atmosphere.

Drop-in centers are a relatively new idea to aid recovery. While they can be found throughout the state, they are still a growing and expanding enterprise founded on the idea of recovery by reducing stigma and encouraging peer support. There are no mental health professional or psychiatrist offices here, just other people dealing with the same issues of recovery. A drop-in offers people a place to go where they can talk to others about their health concerns such as symptoms, medications and side effects. It helps to both educate its members about mental illness, and aid in developing coping skills.

There are a few basic guidelines for members to follow in order to make the center safe and orderly, but these are written and implemented by the membership and board of directors. Everyone who is there is expected to take care of themselves and respect others rights to confidentiality. Persons with physical disabilities are welcome to bring support staff with them. The drop-in is handicap accessible.

Although persons with serious mental illness make up the group, members who are experiencing extreme symptoms of their illness are encouraged to stay home and seek the help of mental health professionals. The drop-in center is meant to augment existing treatment plans.

For more information about the Horizon Circle of Friends Drop-in center, located at 1873 Lincoln Rd. Allegan, MI, contact Sean Maitner at (269) 686-8000 ex: 25.