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Group addresses 'desperate need' to help teen addicts

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LONGMONT — More than a year ago, a group of local advocates began researching what programs are available to treat teens and young adults who are using drugs or alcohol.

There aren't any.

Or at least there aren't many — especially programs that are affordable and accessible.

Which is why a coalition of community groups applied last week for a \$100,000 Colorado Justice Assistance grant to start a substance abuse treatment program for teens and young adults.

"The treatment options that are out there are out of our city or out of reach (financially)," said Christina Pacheco, the city's children and youth resources manager.

More than a year ago, local groups and individuals formed Longmont ASSET, or Adolescent Support System Education Therapy.

Representatives with the city, Boulder County, Alternatives for Youth, Boulder Valley Women's Health, the Longmont Community Justice Partnership and The Rand Foundation, as well as local therapists and community members, started researching what treatment options were available for teens.

ASSET found that programs in the county focus on prevention or intervention, and treatment is usually available only for teens who are involved in the Boulder County judicial system or social services.

There are no local, affordable services for teens or young adults who are not in the county criminal justice system or for those who are in Longmont Municipal Probation but who clearly need treatment, they said.

"The reality is that we are getting calls every day, all of us (who work with youth); there is a desperate need for this," Alternatives for Youth executive director Deb Roberts said.

ASSET submitted its grant application to the state last week. The group won't know until late summer if it will receive the money, but if ASSET does, its members hope to have the program up and running by the end of October.

The program would serve 60 clients each year, teens and young adults from 12 to 24 years old. The goal is for at least half of the clients to be teens who are in the city's probation program but who aren't getting treatment, Roberts said.

ASSET plans to use the "Matrix Model by Hazelden," an intensive, 16-week, family-oriented out-patient treatment program. It includes individual counseling, group therapy, family sessions, a 12-step component and education groups.

The program also would involve clients' families, meaning it could help another few hundred people each year, Pacheco said.

Alternatives For Youth board member Tom Chenault said statistics show that one addict directly affects 17 other people: family, friends, students, employers and co-workers.

"So the number of people in the community who could potentially be helped by this program is over 1,000," he said.

The program also includes "pro-social activities" that the city's Children and Youth Resources would provide.

Pro-social activities mean basically the opposite of what the teens have been doing: participating in adult-led activities or community projects, Pacheco said, rather than drinking or using drugs with their friends.

Roberts recounted a conversation she had with a friend who said teens need risky behavior. The idea is to give them "positive risky behavior" — like rock climbing — to give them natural highs instead of turning to drinking or drugs, she said.

"We need something a whole lot more aggressive for when they're already addicted," Chenault said. "If parents had a resource where we could catch this thing before it turned into a full-blown addiction, we could save so many lives down the road."

Although ASSET has a plan in place and hopes the money follows, the group will start some kind of treatment program for teens, even if the grant doesn't come through.

"We are still going to move forward, even if this grant doesn't go through," Pacheco said. "Plan B is how can we run this on a bare-bones budget."

At the least, Roberts said, the group will find funding to contract with a therapist who could counsel teens and their families. It may not serve 60 clients a year, but it would be a start, she said. The group hopes to begin that piece in April while waiting to find out about the grant, she said.

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