

Never an outsider

Center helps adults with mental health, substance-abuse issues

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There's a new tenant at the end of the row of shops in the Westmoreland Shopping Center on Government Street.

But the Alliance Drop-In Center for adults dealing with chronic mental illness already looks nicely settled into its 8,000-square-foot space, since its move there in July.

There are colorful fall decorations and pictures on the wall. The spacious area is home to two pool tables, a ping pong table, a TV, comfortable sofas and shelves of books.

The place feels welcoming, an atmosphere that's due to the people who run it — the members themselves.

"It's their program," said Melissa Silva, executive director of the Mental Health Association for Greater Baton Rouge, which serves a 10-parish area aiming to help those with or at risk for mental health and substance-abuse issues.

The drop-in center is one of the association's programs.

"It's run the way they want it. That's the great thing and the unique thing about this program," Silva said of the drop-in center. "This is their family."

The center, which is open from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, is a place that fosters acceptance and support for those with mental illness.

"We get to come around people like us and don't have to feel like an outsider," said member Sherman Newman, who's been coming to the center since May.

The center's free services are available to people 18 years or older who are actively receiving treatment for mental illness or have received treatment in the recent past.

Members must be free of drugs and alcohol and be able to follow the rules of conduct developed by the other participants, according to the center's literature.

Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are two of the most common conditions the members face, the staff said.

"One in four people in the U.S. have mental illness," Silva said. "It's more common than heart disease, cancer and diabetes."

When the center moved to the Westmoreland Shopping Center, a crew of volunteers from ExxonMobil cleaned the building from top to bottom, Silva said.

But, in accordance with the center's policies, the members have since then been responsible for the building, down to the colorful fall decorations.

The center features regularly scheduled workshops on mental health, life skills and literature; "Art for Wellness" classes; field trips and Friday "fun" days.

Capital Area United Way funding provides members with lunch from the shopping center's Piccadilly Cafeteria once a week.

Each morning begins with a 30-minute members' meeting, in which participants — typically 25 to 30 people every day — discuss their plans for the week.

The members also do volunteer community work — sharing music and poetry with nursing home residents. At Thanksgiving and Christmas time, they also provide for needy children from families where there is mental illness, Silva said.

"These are people who were told they can do nothing," said Sarah Leonard, the program director, who's been with the drop-in center almost 27 years.

"We show them they can contribute to society. Sarah (Leonard) tells them, 'Yes, you can,'" Silva said.

"For any particular day, I would be sitting at home bored and depressed" without the center, Newman said.

He said he's being treated for major depression, bipolar disorder and schizoaffective disorder and that his medicine is working well.

"In 2009, 99 percent of our clients attending the drop-in center remained out of the hospital," Silva said.

Members have gone on to return to school, finish college, get jobs.

Two of the center's paid staff first began coming to the center as members — Robert McManus, program manager, and Laswanake "Sissy" Robertson, receptionist.

Member Henry Williams is the volunteer president of another program of the local Mental Health Association: Consumers Helping Consumers. That program, funded by a grant from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana, provides advocacy and support for those with mental illness.

The Alliance House Drop-In Center's move from its former location on South Foster this summer, due to the pending sale of that property, is one of several the center has gone through since it was founded in 1979.

Some of the moves were for more space; some were in response to budget changes, staff said.

The center is funded by the Capital Area Human Services District and the Capital Area United Way.

The program's budget remained intact for the 2009-2010 fiscal year, Silva said.

"We've been informed to expect (state) cuts" for the next fiscal year, she said.

Other services of the Mental Health Association are a halfway house for adults with a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse and consumer education classes and support groups throughout the state, as well as advocacy efforts.

On a recent Tuesday morning at the center, instructor Jeff Hingle led a workshop on different aspects of mental health, then, after a break, took up the group's current literature study of the book "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," by Robert Louis Stevenson.

During a break, member Laurie Davis Strickland, who said she is bipolar, said she loves the center.

"I'm well blessed. We all are. We are all so blessed every day," she said.

Leah Gasek, who started coming to the center two months ago, said she has been diagnosed with major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I've improved a lot. I'm learning a lot from other people," she said.

Another new member, Angela Mitchell, who's been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, said of the center, "I love it. It gives you something to do in the daytime. You can learn a lot.

"The people here are the most empowering thing," Mitchell said. "Everybody is so friendly and nice. Everybody is a go-to person."

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