

BUCKS COUNTY Courier Times

MONDAY
JUNE 21, 2010

www.couriertimesnow.com



75¢

HEALTH

Schools are ideal setting for counseling help

C.J. Givigliano, 12, thinks about the right answer while playing a game with Barbara Mannucci, his counselor with Family Services of Bucks County, at Russell Struble Elementary School in Bensalem.

KIM WEIMER
STAFF
PHOTOGRAPHER



Research shows the value of mental health agencies being located near the people who use their services. For children, schools are an ideal setting.

By JO CIAVAGLIA
STAFF WRITER

C.J. Givigliano lost his dad at age 3 and watched his mom struggle with health problems most of his life. They are experiences that kids have trouble dealing with.

In kindergarten C.J. started seeing a family counselor to help him work through his feelings. But his mom

couldn't always make the appointments. After a while, he stopped going.

A few years later, C.J. returned to therapy, but eventually his mom's health deteriorated. Therapy was disrupted again.

The pattern is a familiar one for Family Services of Bucks County, the social service agency that works with C.J.'s family. Work conflicts, lack of transportation and health problems can make it hard for parents to access therapy consistently.

Ten years ago, the agency found a way to alleviate the problem by provid-

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ing counseling services in a handful of schools. Then, last year it found a way to expand the school-based services, despite experiencing a significant loss in program funding.

What the agency did is open state-licensed outpatient mental health centers inside the schools.

With a state license, the office where the counseling takes place is considered part of the Family Services program, which allows the agency to provide more comprehensive and intensive mental health services there.

This year, eight local schools in the Bensalem, Bristol Township, Centennial, and Morrisville school districts were state licensed and served about 100 children.

Counselors were available once or twice a week during the school year and the agency can continue offering therapy services in schools over the summer if the buildings remain open, said Marlene Piasecki, the agency's director of program planning and development.

Four of the schools — Everett McDonald Elementary in Warminster and James Buchanan Elementary, Ben Franklin Freshman Academy and the Franklin Roosevelt Middle School in Bristol Township — this year also became Medicaid-credentialed. That means Family Services can be reimbursed for counseling services provided there, creating a new stable funding source for the program.

Family Services is now seeking Medicaid credentialing for its other school-based centers, Piasecki said.

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

Research shows one way to improve access to mental health services is for agencies to locate closer to the people they serve. Schools are ideal since they're places where kids that need help spend a large amount of time.

Parents in the program can bring children before or after school for counseling, or if necessary, during the school day. Families can also attend sessions. If behavior problems arise during the school day, they can be immediately addressed and school counselors can more easily connect students with services, Piasecki said.

For parents and kids, there is also less social stigma attached to accessing mental health services within a school rather than traditional mental health centers, she added.

Since expanding its school-based program, the agency has seen fewer canceled appointments, compared with families who receive services at its Middletown headquarters, Piasecki said. School staffers also report less disruptive behavior and improved rela-

tionships among children in the program.

"They do find it makes a difference," Piasecki added.

McDonald Principal Keely Mahan said he has seen many benefits since adding a school-based program this year. Among the biggest is the counselor assigned to the school is bilingual, and serves as a liaison for Spanish-speaking students and their families.

"It's been phenomenal," Mahan said.

There has definitely been a decrease in chronic behavior problems among children who are referred to the program, Mahan said, and the satellite center also provides a convenient location for parents.

"They know where the school is. They know how to get to the office," Mahan added.

School-based counselor Barbara Mannucci of Family Services said she sees 15 students, including C.J., who is 12. In the year she has worked with C.J., he has become more motivated, pays better attention in class and completed assignments, Mannucci said. He is also more helpful around the house.

"He really enjoys the time he comes to spend with me," she said.

NEW ATTITUDE

Samantha Givigliano, C.J.'s mom, says her son talks to Mannucci about things he doesn't share with anyone else, including her.

In the past, her health problems plus a lack of regular transportation interfered with C.J.'s therapy schedule, leading to the long breaks. Without the consistency, C.J.'s behavior regressed, she said.

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But since he's back in counseling through the school-based program, Givigliano has noticed big differences in his attitude and behavior. If he starts acting out, she tells Mannucci. And soon, C.J. comes around apologizing.

One day, she was worried about a messy house on the day a social worker was scheduled to visit. C.J. got up early and cleaned the house without being told. He mowed the lawn and even ordered a pizza, his mom said.

"He was looking after me. It was the cutest thing. A lot of things are changed," she said. "You can see him trying to change his behavior."

Givigliano said she has noticed her son has become more money conscious and more empathetic and sympathetic to others. He also has started talking more about his late dad.

"I don't know what I'd do without this whole program," she said. "When you have an illness like this, it affects everybody around you. This helps take the guilt off me and the pressure."

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