

Where Teens, Families Can Find Mental Health Help

By Glen Thomas Hicks
The Connection

(Editor's note: This is Part 1 in a two-part series on public and private groups that provide comprehensive family services)

While studying business in college, Tom Minnick discovered what he believed to be, as he puts it, an aptitude for reading people psychologically. As a result, a guidance counselor advised him to combine his two interests in business and counseling to go into the business of counseling.

After finishing a Master's Degree in Psychiatric Social Work, he did exactly that, and founded the Northern Virginia Counseling Group (NVCG), a private, for-profit medical group with offices and services in Reston, Herndon, Annandale, and Manassas.

One of his primary motivations for founding the group and for creating its specific type of programs was his discovery that, in dealing with public mental health agencies, when someone had a problems with alcohol or drug abuse they had to go to one agency for help, but if they also had a mental health problem they had to go to another agency.

That system is "bad for people with both problems," Minnick said. "What is innovative about our approach it that we combine treatment for both types of problems in one therapeutic setting."

Working primarily with teenagers is something of a new concept, Minnick said, and working with them primarily in terms of alcohol and drug problems is also a new concept.

"There is not much experience in the community with working with both of those problems at the same time," he said. "We call it a mental health one-stop shopping approach."

The public agencies in Fairfax County have a difficult time dealing with both problems at the same time, Minnick said, and he created NVCG to fill that void.

Minnick added, one of his main thrusts in the future, will be to find funding for those who cannot find money to pay, such as getting funding for them from corporate sponsors and local businesses and citizens.

Choices:

On the other hand, Chris Volz, Site Director of the Alcohol and Drug Use Services of Falls Church, a Fairfax County agency, said that his program provides help for substance abuse and addiction problems. However, some services do have mental health components, Volz said, and the agency does have dual diagnosis capacity. These

programs are available to all residents of Fairfax County, but only residents of Fairfax County. Fees are based on a sliding scale, and no one is turned away for inability to pay, Volz said.

Deborah Sikes, one of the counselors for NVCG, has a Master of Educational Counseling Psychology and has been working with dually-diagnosed adolescents and their families for eleven years.

“A dual diagnosis means a diagnosis of a mental health disorder such as depression or attention deficit disorder along with a substance abuse problem,” Sikes said.

“Although I work with all age groups,” she said, “I work primarily with adolescents. In fact, we have a dual diagnosis program that is a large part of the practice.” Referrals come from probation officers, parents, and schools.

“These kids have either been caught using drugs at school or arrested on a drug charge, or discovered to be using drugs by their parents,” she said.

On the other hand, often parents bring their teens in for a mental health problem perhaps with only a suspicion of drug abuses, so the counselors do a comprehensive evaluation.

Approaches To Treatment:

Such an approach includes asking many questions of the parents about their children, looking for specific behaviors such as sneaking out of the house or sleeping in school. In talking with the youth without the parents present, even though the children do not confess, Sikes said.

“We know questions to ask that are a giveaway that tell us that they are involved with drugs. That, along with the urinalysis screen, tells us what we need to know.”

“One way or another,” she said, “the counselors find out whether any intervention needs to take place. There are different levels of intervention from education to enrollment in the group’s dual diagnosis program to individual counseling,” she added.

“For the kids who follow our treatment program,” Sikes said, “and whose parents also follow the program, the success rate is very high.”

The group’s program includes and is similar to other 12-step programs, such as the original one created by Alcoholics Anonymous.

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"We provide everyone in our program at least with exposure to twelve step programs," she said, "and sometimes we require strict participation in such programs."

One of the group's clients said that she has worked with NVCG for about five years, since her son who is now 17, was 12.

"At that age I began to notice changes in his personality," she said. "He became sullen and withdrawn, and I knew that was one of the warning signs of either depression or drug abuse."

She then took her son to the family pediatrician for a checkup, and asked the doctor, while doing the routine tests, to also do a urinalysis screening for drug use.

"That turned up positive, and she immediately enrolled her son in a public substance abuse program, but it was unsuccessful.

"He was in and out of several programs for several years," she said, "and none of them worked," the mother said. "Finally, we found NVCG and their program has brought his problem under control. It's their joint approach to both depression and drug abuse that has helped my son".

Affordable:

In that regard, John Wrightson, a Juvenile Probation Officer with the Fairfax County Juvenile Courts, said, "When a young person comes through me with a substance abuse problem, I normally make referrals to the county agencies for drug and other problems. Then, I refer them to one of the private groups such as NVCG."

Fairfax County charges for both assessment and treatment, but has a sliding scale of fees based on income. Virtually anyone can afford the county services, Wrightson said, because the charges can be as low as \$5 week.

Although her son is doing well now, the mother said, the family is fully aware that for the rest of his life he will be in a state of recovery, and that they must always be on guard for a relapse.

"We are very aware that some families have children with mental or emotional disorders that are going to continue to need treatment for a long time," said John Harold, director of the Youth and Family Services program for Fairfax County. "Then we also have families that have a problem that they want to work on even though they have good resources and they want to come in and focus on one thing then leave the program."

Another NVCG counselor, Patrick Slifka, emphasized the dual role of his counseling, and claimed that the group's services include fast action and an unparalleled relationship with court system that is crucial to helping families, he added.

Doug Homes, Hearing Officer in the Superintendent of Schools for Fairfax County, said "We have worked with NVCG for several years and have been very pleased with their services."

Slifka's primary practice is to work with the adults of the family on an outpatient basis.

"I do home-based service work on contracts with the county for kids at risk of being removed from their home," he said. "This is the last line of help before the family is broken up," he added. "We are committed to family preservation if at all possible, but safety is our number one concern."

Future Possibilities:

Slifka said he believes that in the future, home-based services are likely to grow, along with community action planning to keep people out of hospitals and work with them in their homes. That approach, he said, cuts costs, and makes both patients and therapists more comfortable.

Holmes said that, often, his agency does not get involved until there has been some kind of crisis such as a student being expelled for possession of a controlled substance on school grounds to a student being arrested and processed through the juvenile justice system.

After incidents such as those that have occurred, Holmes said, "we get involved and try to find a solution for the problem that not only helps the young person with their problem, but also does not destroy their lives."

"We have found that NVCG and other private counseling groups, along with the Fairfax County programs, can help us achieve that solution," Holmes said. "Their programs often lead to solutions that take the students out of the legal system and back into the schools, even while they are still in treatment."

Usually, he added, that means that they will be admitted to one of the three alternative high schools in Fairfax County where their treatment can be monitored while they finish their education.

Not every case leads to a happy ending, Holmes said, but, fortunately many of them do.