Counseling center adds staff member

JOURNAL STAFF REPORT

Donald Bernovich

A Borderland counseling center has added a new member to its clinical staff.

Donald Bernovich joins Northland Counseling Center after recently finished his predoctoral internship in Clinical Psychology at Colorado West Regional Mental Health in Grand Junction, Colo. The center is excited for the addition to its staff, Bill Johnson, director of operations at NCC, said.

"Our staff have been short handed for several months," he said in a release. "The addition of Dr. Bernovich will help us provide more timely admissions, during what is a time of increase need in the community."

Bernovich's training and experience in areas the staff wasn't well-versed in made him a good fit for the NCC, Johnson said.

"He brings some things we don't have as much experience in, like health and wellness psychology, and strengths in biofeedback," he said. "We're a very collaborative team here, easy to get along with and really hard working, and I could tell from the interview he would fit in well here."

Bernovich will be seeing adolescents and adults for individual, couples and group therapy. He said his main interest is in health and wellness issues and he's looking forward to working in Koochiching County.

"I am very excited to be given this opportunity to join the unique community of Koochiching County," Bernovich said.

EDA

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estimated by Bob Haley, RLMC interim CEO of the hospital, in preparation for a meeting about one year ago with the Koochiching County Board and International Falls City Council. He said the number of potential job cuts was not a part of the integration negotiation talks that have now ended.

Nikcevich said Tuesday he had no idea where Anderson got the number.

"In fact," he told The Journal, "because of the concerns we heard about the potential for job loss, we put in place the employment guarantees. What would happen after two years? I don't know that. No one knows that."

He said Essentia has proposed no loss of employment and tried to "provide some stability and eliminate the message about job loss and, in fact, focus the message the best we can with integrated care for the patients of the International Falls community."

In 2009, Essentia Health and Falls Memorial Hospital entered into three agreements: an affiliation agreement and management services and professional services agreements. As part of the new relationship, Falls Memorial Hospital and Essentia Health-International Falls Clinic became know as Rainy Lake Medical Center, with hospital and clinic campuses. Half of the RLMC Board are appointed by Essentia, a majority of whom live in the Falls area. The other half are appointed by the prior Falls Memorial Board, of which board members may continue to appoint themselves for subsequent terms or can name their replacements. These members refer to themselves as Falls Memorial trustees.

Meanwhile, Anderson, a Falls Memorial trustee, told The Journal RLMC Board members Tuesday received copies of the confidentiality agreement between Essentia and RLMC Board. He said three attorneys — one each representing RLMC and Essentia, and one representing the RLMC Board of Trustees, are working on the dissolution of affiliation and other agreements, referred to as "unwinding."

"Until this thing is completely unwound, we're just trying to have folks understand that we're going back to where we were prior to 2009 (when affiliation began)," said Anderson. "Affiliation has not worked out for whatever reason. No one is pointing fingers at one side or the other. It just did not work out and full integration is not something the Falls Memorial trustees were interest in giving up their hospital (to)."

Anderson said he understands the change in direction is unsettling to some members of the community and said both RLMC and Essentia are making plans for moving forward. He said he hoped the community would be patient during the unwinding.

"Service will be there both at the clinic and hospital, just as it has been for years," he said. "We have good physicians at the clinic. Many of us have been patients of those physicians and specialists with St. Mary's Duluth, now Essentia, in the past and will continue into the future."

Anderson also said the RLMC Board is not seeking full integration with any other entity. "We are talking to other entities about what services they might bring to International Falls — to an independent hospital."

Prior to action Monday, EDA commissioners wondered if action requesting details of the negotiations would have a polarizing effect on the board. Rejecting that idea, they instead agreed to urge the board to reconvene talks.

EDA Director Shawn Mason said more information about the negotiations may help the community better understand the decision to end the talks.

She pointed to an expanded kitchen and laundry built into to the new facility of Good Samaritan Society — International Falls to accommodate a new hospital anticipated by the community.

Steve Shermoen, a member of the EDA Advisory Board, told the commission the last sentence of an editorial published by The Journal in August — "We urge both sides to consider coming back to the table in an effort toward compromise in the best interests of this community."- summed up the intentions of board members in bringing the issue to the EDA Commission.

"We're not looking to assign blame," he said, "but to jump start the process and get people back to the table to work out their differences."

Mason told the board in April she had asked Nikcevich via email to consider consolidating future growth in processing, coding and claims at Essentia's 58 centers in the Midwest in International Falls. She said the centers had 87 job openings at that time in those kinds of positions. She said the cool climate of International Falls would be beneficial for a data processing and storage center because of the low energy costs compared to warmer climates.

FOOD STAMPS

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as SNAP.

"It definitely would affect us (if it is made law) in a lot of different ways," he said.

Minnesotans could face a double-whammy of cuts, he said, because the state is in "sanction mode," a result of not meeting federal guidelines. "If we go another year, the state will see a reduction in federal funding," he said, adding that Koochiching passed its audit.

Murray said the cuts approved by the U.S. House last week would impact everyone receiving SNAP, including working families, seniors, children, veterans and adults looking for work.

He said in 2009, Koochiching had 613 cases, which range from one person to families, open for food support. In 2010, he said there were 713 cases open.

He said the number of county residents eligible for food stamps in 2011, the most recent year of statistics available, was 1,564. The total amount the county spent in 2011 for the program was $1.7 million, with administration of the program adding $200,000. In 2010, the county spent $1.5 million, he noted.

And he said if the House-approved cuts are implemented, they will be on top of cuts made in 2009 just now taking effect.

"All benefits are decreasing by the federal allotment," he said. "People are already seeing decreases."

Murray said there is no question that food shelves will see an increase in use as a result of the proposed and impending cuts.

While he said the county provides a grant of $5,000 each year to assist the Falls Hunger Coalition, "it will not be enough if all this comes into play."

Bev Mayfield, The Salvation Army envoy in International Falls, said the organization's mission is to help people in poverty.

"If there are cuts to the funding to people who receive food assistance, it will be a burden on the nonprofits and food shelves like The Salvation Army," she said. "We will see an increase in use with those cuts."

Anderson said pushing the House cuts may be stories of food stamp misuse, which she calls ridiculous. "Like stories of people getting tattoos with their SNAP benefits," she said. "That can't happen, it doesn't happen and it's ridiculous to think it does happen."

She urged people to do their homework to find out the facts of the matter and then decide for themselves. She pointed to a statistic that 84 percent of SNAP recipients are children, elderly or people with disabilities.

"That's who we are going to target for cuts?" she asked.

And then, she said, people must make their thoughts known to their federal elected representatives.

"People need to write and tell their representatives in office how important these programs are, how important it is to leave them alone," she said. "They are dealing with the health and wealth of the citizens of our country — the same people they are representing."

She said local hunger may not be easily identifiable. Many people on SNAP are seniors with part-time jobs trying to make ends meet or people working two jobs to feed themselves and their family.

She urged people to take the SNAP challenge — live on $4.50 per day, a basic benefit amount.

"That's the reality," she said. "People should try for just one day."

HEALTH

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The director said Koochiching, along with other counties impacted by the state's decision, submitted an appeal to get at least two plans to provide service to their areas. However, Murray learned it was the department's plan to only have one provider service smaller counties.

"A philosophy (of the department) before made pretty clear to us we were supposed try to give the clients as much choice as possible," Murray said.

In July, the board agreed to allow UCare, a nonprofit health plan providing health coverage and services to more than 300,000 members in Minnesota and western Wisconsin, to provide health care services to recipients of medical assistance in Koochiching County.

However, Murray said Tuesday had he known UCare would end up being the only provider serving the county, he "wouldn't have even picked UCare."

"Medica does a good job up here, Blue Plus does a pretty good job, UCare fails in a lot of the areas," Murray said. "You'd think Medica (would have been selected)."

During a conference call in response to the appeal, Murray asked Human Service Department officials if surveys had been distributed to county medical assistance consumers. He said after being told the department doesn't do that, he explained to officials that had surveys been given, it would have been discovered that there are only 50 clients in the county who use UCare because of the access issue.

"If you have to travel over 30 miles to see a specialist, (UCare) won't pay for it," Murray said. "We have to call and ask for special authorization to do it every time."

In addition, Murray said there are medical facilities in the area that don't accept UCare.

"Trying to get UCare to reimburse us (is difficult)," he said. "That is why their rates are so low because it is almost impossible to get paid from them."

County Commissioner Wade Pavleck echoed Murray's concerns.

"This county board over the years has traditionally felt that we need to give clients choice," he said, adding that having one provider eliminates competition.

"Here we are in the far regions of Minnesota with these huge distances to travel and we're being discriminated against... at least that is my belief," he said. "I don't think we say this is over and we just take this...This should not stand."

Murray said during the conference call he told officials "they failed miserably" and is already anticipating a flood of complaints.

"I'm not the middle man anymore," Murray said. "I don't like telling people there's nothing I can do. Dealing with this is going to be a nightmare."

Pavleck said the letter drafted by the county will invite health department officials and local lawmakers to the area to "express extreme displeasure over what they've done."

"We don't need to buy that it's too late," he said. "What they've done here is so wrong. This is a big issue for northern Minnesota."

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I'm the fields of ripening grain.
I'm in the morning hush,
I'm in the graceful rush
of birds in circling flight,
I'm the stars shine of the night.
I'm in the flowers that bloom,
I'm in a quiet room.
I'm the birds that sing,
I'm in each lovely thing.
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