

New hope in mental health therapy now available at the beach

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Starting this Friday, there will be an expansion of mental health service to the Beaches community. A partnership between Community Presbyterian Church and Life Renewed Counseling makes it possible for Beach residents to have convenient, local appointments with licensed therapists. Clients will meet by appointment with counselors at 150 Sherry Drive in Atlantic Beach.

Both the church and the counseling service stress that the counseling is not "Christian counseling." There is no agenda, no pressure to believe any certain doctrine, attend any church. The therapist is there to help healing, not to convert.

This partnership is the result of a long, dedicated search by the church to find affordable mental health services locally and the timely reorganization of what was formerly Pastoral Counseling Services.

"We have had a support group, and offered Mental Health First Aid," the Rev. Jessi Higginbotham said.

Mental Health First Aid is a day-long course offered by Baptist Health.

"We struggled to refer people for outside help (with a licensed counselor). There is a real need – at its peak, right now. After talking to professionals, bouncing around ideas, we asked, 'What if we had a therapist here?'"

Life Renewed Counseling Service, located in San Marco, had changed its name and its vision after a two-year review. Director Cliff Thomas said they had been looking for a way to expand out of San Marco. When Community Presbyterian contacted him, it was "perfect timing."

Mental health counseling includes a

person's emotional, psychological and social well being. It affects how we think, feel, act. Life Renewed Counseling focuses on such issues as grief, divorce, trauma, loss, separation and family issues. They will meet with teens and children ages 5 and older.

"For families, we look at the whole system," Thomas said.

Higginbotham defines this as "short-term, goal-oriented talk therapy."

Counselors listen in depth, understand without judging and give support to help clients develop a greater balance for living.

This counseling differs from mental illness which is the focus of psychiatry. Mental illness such as addiction, bipolar disorder and eating disorders are treated by psychiatrists who can write prescriptions.

Already working at the Beach, True North has been advocating for openness to talk about mental health issues, to reduce the stigma and allow sufferers to get help and support. True North will eventually be one of the three missions located at 7 North. At this time, the build out and staffing are still in the future but the services have been available for some time. Calling itself a "mental health collaborative," True North works through faith communities to offer events and education.

The Rev. Jerry Sweat of Beach Church, the founding organization of True North, welcomes Life Renewed Mental Health Counseling to the Beach.

"They have good insight, a faith emphasis and can bring secular counselors. And Community Presbyterian has a heart for

this issue."

"Affordable" was an important issue to Community Presbyterian Church in its quest. Thomas addressed that issue.

"The average cost for mental health therapy is \$130 per hour. We start at \$110 with a sliding scale based on a person's income, number of dependents.

"In other offices, the first visit, called the 'intake,' usually takes longer and costs more. For us, the first visit is \$50, no matter what."

He explained that the first visit is often the hurdle. Not knowing what the therapy will cost, yet having a large expense at the start, keeps many people from getting the help needed.

That first step, the intake, is a time for the therapist to listen to "what brought you here."

Thomas said, "You tell your story, and the therapist begins to see the nuances."

At this meeting, you will be told the fees, and will fill out the necessary paperwork.

"You can bring your faith along on the journey," he said, "if that is your wish."

In fact, their mission statement calls it "affordable, faith-honoring counseling."

At this point, the licensed mental health counselor from Life Renewed will be available at the Beach on Fridays. Appointments will be scheduled through Life Renewed, and all financial arrangements and payments will be handled by the counseling agency. The church is providing a private, rent-free place for the sessions.

To make an appointment, go to or jax.org or call 398-2437, ext. 103. The licensed mental health counselor for Beach appointments is Jacob Hatch, and you

can find his credentials and background on the Web site.

"As we grow, we will expand the number of days for the Beach appointments and the number of therapists," Thomas said.

Life Renewed Counselors are all state-licensed therapists, with specialties as social workers, mental health specialists and marriage and family specialists.

Higginbotham said that some people assume that pastors do counseling.

"We do let people come to us and talk, but we refer them to the professionals. We aren't trained, or licensed to offer the help needed."

True North sees the faith leaders as one of the pathways to help for those suffering mental health issues. While many sufferers feel isolated, they might share with their faith leader, pastor, clergy.

"We, at True North, want to mobilize the faith leaders in our community to normalize the conversation around mental health," Sweat said. "We offer events which provide an openness to talk about it. We put tools into the hands of those on the front line. I like to call it a Chamber of Commerce for mental illness information. It is where the clergy can go to find qualified help.

"In this way, we can give a warm hand-off to professionals," he said.

To learn about True North, go to truenorthmentalhealth.com and click on "learn more" for upcoming events.

As Higginbotham said, "We have people who need help right now."

Life Renewed Counseling is now available at the Beach, to "give people hope, to live life and not to just go through it."