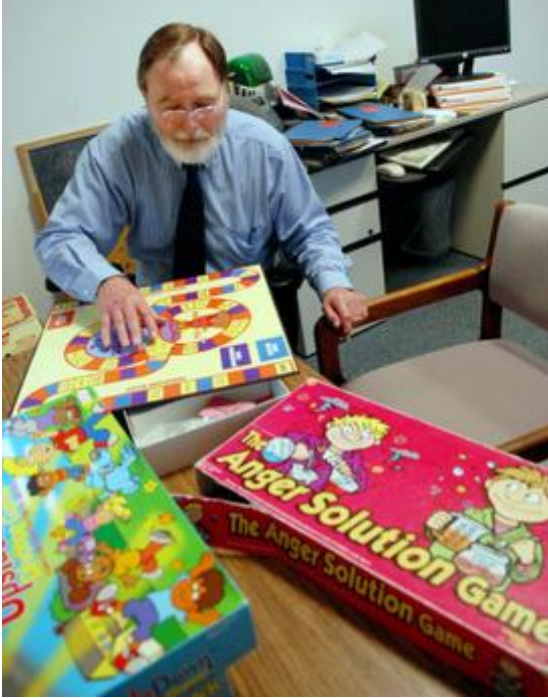


Our View: Nonprofit health workers on short end of budget

Norwich Bulletin Editorial

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Larry Ash-Morgan, senior psychologist at United Services Inc. in Dayville, uses therapeutic board games to help children open up about issues troubling them.

May is National Mental Health Awareness Month, an appropriate time to examine the enormous contribution the dozens of nonprofit organizations in Eastern Connecticut — and statewide — provide local communities and their residents.

The purpose of the designation is an effort to refocus our attention on how we can better evaluate and cope with daily stress and our mental wellness. In these difficult economic times, stress is a major factor in many people's lives as they struggle to make ends meet. It can manifest itself in a variety of forms, creating problems both in the home and in the workplace.

Conservative studies estimate the cost to industry associated with mental illness is roughly \$79 billion per year. The toll it takes on families, in terms of increased cases of domestic violence and child abuse, cannot be adequately reflected in a dollar amount.

There are many agencies offering assistance. One such group is United Services Inc., northeastern Connecticut's largest behavioral health center, that recently unveiled a new initiative aimed at helping workers in the region better manage the stress they encounter in the workplace — stress that also may be a result of pressure at home, or brought into the home.

For more than 25 years, the agency has been providing assistance to thousands of workers and companies through its Employee Assistance Program. This new initiative is

aimed at employers, offering a free stress management seminar to help them in their support of employee wellness.

It is just one of a variety of services United Services provides to residents of Windham County and parts of Tolland and New London counties. They are a one-stop, community-based service offering programs for children and adults in northeastern Connecticut. It operates effectively and efficiently — but is grossly underfunded by the state, as are all nonprofits.

The recently concluded General Assembly session brought about another year of unkept promises. Nonprofits, such as United Services, will not receive any cost-of-living increase in the new fiscal year that begins July 1. The 3 percent increase in the current fiscal year budget was zeroed out in the second year of the state's biennial budget. And yet, the demand for services continues to grow. State employees who do the same exact same job, and are represented by the same union as nonprofit workers, will receive between a 4.5 percent and 5.5 percent cost of living increase.

Demand increasing

Just two months ago, United Services opened an expanded facility in Dayville — doubling its size to serve the increasing number of clients. The agency treated more than 5,000 clients this year, and projects that number to increase by 20 percent in the coming year. Nonprofits across the state, serving approximately 500,000 Connecticut residents annually, are feeling the same pressures.

It's possible some of these agencies could close their doors this year, unable to continue because of a lack of resources. Others may be forced to curtail programs because they cannot afford to continue them at current levels.

At United Services, there are questions as to how long it can continue to operate its domestic violence program and shelter. That program hasn't received any increase in funding for years. The agency maintains it through private fundraising annually to the tune of \$100,000.

This is not just a social problem. It's also an economic problem. Lost productivity in the workplace as a result of mental illness — stress — can have a devastating impact on industry, as well as the home and community.

State leaders are well aware of the problems these agencies are dealing with — it's their constituents that are impacted. Nearly every member of the Eastern Connecticut delegation, including Senate President Pro Tem Donald Williams, D-Brooklyn, and House Appropriations Committee Chairman Denise Merrill, D-Storrs, have districts served by the agency.

Nonprofits such as United Services provide preventative programs designed to avoid more serious problems that can result from nontreatment.

It's time the state recognized the value of that, and start paying more than just lip service.