

Catholic Charities to pilot e-counseling program

By Gene Fadness
Editor

Catholic Charities of Idaho's trained and licensed clinical counselors have only two offices, one in Boise and one in Idaho Falls. To better accommodate the needs of those who need affordable, professional counseling, the agency is turning to technology.

The Idaho Falls office is now offering, on a pilot basis, e-counseling services. People who live too far from the Idaho Falls office, or are homebound or lack transportation can access Catholic Charities' counseling on their computer, I-Pad or smart phone.

Idaho Falls, in the eastern deanery, is in the middle of a large geographic territory that stretches from Arco and Salmon south to the Utah border.

"There are people in these areas who don't have the direct access that people in Idaho Falls and Boise have to these services," said Rich Meyers, a counselor and regional director of CCI's Idaho Falls office. "So we've been thinking of ways that we can extend our service areas without me putting thousands of miles on my car or renting office space elsewhere," he said.

Ideally, face-to-face counseling is always best, Meyers said. But there are times when people need counseling but live in rural areas far from Idaho Falls or are homebound.

"Also, we find that people are very mobile," said Donna Malone, communications manager for CCI. "A businessman is on the road or a student is away from home and it is difficult to schedule a weekly

appointment," she said.

Under the pilot project, CCI will assist people to download a free app for Zoom Video Communications that will allow counseling to take place remotely. Meyers and his client will be able to see each other, but on a computer or an I-Pad screen.

CCI chose the Zoom platform because it is encrypted, better ensuring confidentiality, and, therefore, compliant with the Health Insurance and Portability Act (HIPPA), which is important for legal and insurance purposes.

The e-counseling is a pilot project because questions remain that likely won't be answered without experimentation.

CCI will strongly encourage that at least one visit, preferably the initial consultation, take place in the Idaho Falls office, after which the parameters for e-sessions can be set.

"Legally and ethically, its ideal to be sitting across from person with paper and pencil in hand," said Meyers who is also a counselor for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. "Research shows



Rich Meyers

face-to-face is still the most effective counseling."

However, e-service counseling can serve as a "missionary service," to provide aid to those who otherwise would not have access, Meyers said.

"Rural communities such as those surrounding Idaho Falls and in this entire deanery have high rates of alcoholism and depression. The suicide rate is disproportionately high in rural areas and one of the reasons for that is lack of services. So this fits well into the clinical and ethical mission of Catholic Charities."

Meyers said his nephew recently received counseling in Boston. "He said it was fantastic. It's a cutting edge opportunity because a lot of people are accessing services via their computers and we're not going out of our houses that much anymore," Meyers said. "People are getting more comfortable communicating with e-services like Skype and FaceTime. My mom uses FaceTime and she's 84."

Catholic Charities offers professional counseling to people of all faiths on a sliding fee schedule that is based on income. "We never let the issue of fees be an impediment to services. That's the charitable part of Catholic Charities in my book," Meyers said. "It's what makes us different."

If the Idaho Falls pilot program works well, CCI may look to expand its e-services to others areas such as immigration services and parenting training, Malone said.

To learn more, contact CCI at 208-881-0740 or go to www.ccidaho.org.