

Newtown struggles to meet mental health demand

March 16 2014, by Pat Eaton-Robb



In this Dec. 14, 2013 file photo, Balloons fly outside a doctor's office on the first anniversary of the Sandy Hook massacre, in Newtown, Conn., Saturday, Dec. 14, 2013. Newtown officials are applying for a federal grant and charities are pooling their resources in an attempt to ensure that free mental health care remains available to those who need it following the December 2012 massacre at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. The moves come as some charities begin to run out of money. Officials say they have no real idea of how much they will ultimately need for mental health care in Newtown, and for how many years. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

Some of the charities paying for mental health care for children and families affected by the Sandy Hook massacre are running short of money and officials don't know how much they'll need—and for how long—to repair the psychological scars from the mass shooting.

Newtown officials are applying for a federal grant and charities are pooling their resources in an attempt to ensure that free long-term [mental health](#) care remains available following the December 2012 shooting that left 20 first graders and six educators dead.

"We hear in the media, 'Well Sandy Hook was 14 months ago, isn't everything fine?'" said Candice Bohr, executive director of the Newtown Youth and Family Services. "Well, no it's not and we get calls every day from the school wanting to address an issue. I would love to say that in 10 years we're going to see a huge drop and everyone's better and we've moved on, but that's not the case."

Three of the charities that have been providing funds for services have started working together, while the charity that has raised the most money—the Newtown-Sandy Hook Community Foundation—says that it will likely join the alliance soon.

The Newtown Lions Club, which raised \$350,000 for mental-health services in the wake of the shooting, has told the 250 people it served that it could no longer directly pay their mental health bills because fundraising was being outpaced by demand.

"The demand was well beyond anything we could have predicted," said Peter McNulty, president of the Lions Club.

Other charities are picking up the slack. The town's Rotary Club and the Newtown Memorial Fund, which had been spending a combined \$30,000 a month on mental [health care](#) for 150 families, partnered with

the Lions Club, said Brian Mauriello, founder of the Newtown Memorial Fund.

Those who need help are being steered to the state's Office of Victim Services, which processes applications for money from a pool created by all three charities.

So far, nobody has been turned down.

"I don't think anybody has a crystal ball to say whether there's going to be enough money or not," said Linda Cimino, the director of the state Office of Victim's Services "I do know that the plan is for a 15-year horizon."

The Newtown-Sandy Hook Community Foundation has about \$4 million left after giving more than \$7 million to the 40 families most affected by the shooting.

Meanwhile, the town is seeking more than \$7 million in a federal grant, in part to help cover the next 18 months of costs for the nonprofit agencies providing free [mental health care](#). The grant also would create a "recovery and resiliency" board, which would help match people with specific services and programs.

Bohr said her organization saw an 85 percent jump in clients after the Sandy Hook shooting, and had to quadruple its staff, adding 29 positions.

They have been providing everything from intense one-on-one therapy, to simple advice to parents who come in asking how to deal with their children's questions about the shooting.

Another nonprofit, the Resiliency Center of Newtown, opened in

September. It has served about 500 people with free programs such as art and music therapy, grief counseling, and parenting classes.

Stephanie Cinque, the executive director, said they have been funded with private donations, but she is counting on the federal grant money to keep the programing going. While they await a response to the grant request, Cinque said it's clear the services are having an impact.

"After all the therapy she'd been through since 12/14 we never thought we'd have her back," the mother of a Sandy Hook student who completed a self-esteem program wrote in an email shared by Cinque. "And we have our daughter back."

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