

Geauga

TIMES COURIER

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Photo by Anastasia Nicholas

Surrounded by members of the Geauga County Board of Mental Health and Recovery Services and Ravenwood Health, Ohio Department of Behavioral Health Director Tia Marcel Moretti and mental health board Executive Director Christine Lakomiak cut the ribbon at the newly-expanded Transitional Living Center during an open house last Friday.

Transitional Living Center gets some TLC

Expansion clears way to help more adults with severe mental illness

By ANASTASIA NICHOLAS

Thanks to a recent renovation and expansion project, the Transitional Living Center, located in Claridon Township, has room for nearly twice as many

Gauga County adults with serious mental illness.

"This isn't just a building," said Kathy Johnson, member of the Geauga County Board of Mental Health and Recovery Services. "It's

a welcoming space where people can find stability, build everyday skills, and make meaningful strides toward independence and recovery. Facilities like these play a vital role

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Community needs more foster homes for teens

By ANASTASIA NICHOLAS

Having foster homes in the community is a huge part of social services, Geauga County Job and Family Services (JFS) Executive Director Craig Swenson said.

"I really call our foster parents Earth angels, because they really, really are," he said. "These people take strangers – oftentimes going through a lot of trauma themselves – into their homes, introduce them to their family, take care of them, are up with them in the middle of the night doing really arduous, difficult things, trying to just help them settle down from a traumatic event."

More foster homes mean more kids can stay in family-like settings. The county has grown from 12 homes to 19 in a few years, thanks to Recruitment Specialist Allie Hulsmann, Mr. Swenson said.

"If you think of a percentage increase – not just in thinking of raw numbers, but thinking of a percentage increase – especially coming through COVID, coming through lots of difficult times, finances, everything that we've been just dealing with as a community – to have that increase during that time is remarkable," he said.

Also, he said, oftentimes when foster homes eventually adopt, they "come off the rolls." To see that increase in light of that is remarkable, he said.

JFS is working on finding additional foster homes, he said.

"We've done a lot over the past couple of years to really boost our recruitment efforts, which has shown in the number of homes we've been

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Chardon school board hires assistant principal

By ANASTASIA NICHOLAS

The Chardon Board of Education recently approved the hire of two new administrators.

The board hired Anthony Forfia to be Chardon Middle School assistant principal next year with an annual salary of \$105,885.

"I'm greatly looking forward to being at Chardon Middle School," he said.

The board also hired Lindsey Baar, a Chardon High School alum, to be the new director of student services with a yearly salary of \$127,066.

"I'm really excited to get back into the community where we live, where our kids attend school, and I look forward to carrying on the strong foundation that Ms. (Linda) Elegante has left within the student services department," she said.

Open enrollment restricted

The board heard a host of policy changes on first reading.

"Most of these changes are due to alignment with the current state of law," Superintendent Michael Hanlon said.

The superintendent honed in on one particular policy change, which restricted open enrollment in the future.

"This isn't a significant departure from the operation of the district for a number of years now but to ensure there's clarity with policy," Dr. Hanlon said. "The recommendation is to revise policy to basically restrict open enrollment, prohibit open enrollment from districts beyond the boundaries of Chardon Schools with the exceptions of continuing to accept children of staff members,

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in reducing hospital visits, helping prevent homelessness, and offering care in the most supportive and least restrictive environment.”

Prior to 1980, those with severe mental illness often spent years – if not their entire lives – in psychiatric hospitals or other institutional settings, said board member Reba Dykes.

“The development and increasing use of first-generation antipsychotic medications between 1954 and 1975 helped make community-based care more feasible, contributing to the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1980s,” she said.

In Geauga County, with the support of the mental health board and in partnership with Ravenwood Health, efforts would begin to move individuals from state hospitals back into the community, she said.

“While some individuals could live independently with significant supports, others

required a higher level of care,” she went on. “During the 1980s and early 1990s, a local family provided room and board for one individual at a time, but this approach was insufficient to meet the growing need. It became clear that some individuals required 24/7 monitoring and support – care that fell between independent living and institutionalization.”

The mental health board saw the need for a dedicated residential facility and made the move to fund a 24-hour residential program for adults, she said. The board and Ravenwood Health would develop the county’s first adult residential program, which the board funded and Ravenwood operated.

“Thirty years ago, the Transitional Living Center was in a house just off Chardon Square, behind the Chardon Assembly of God church – a building that would later become the Tea

House. The home accommodated up to three adults and also housed the CopeLine,” she said. “However, the Chardon home posed accessibility challenges because it was a two-story structure with bedrooms on the second floor and did not meet ADA standards.”

Later, the mental health board received a state capital grant for a purpose-built residential facility. The board acquired the land from the county commissioners and began planning for what would become today’s facility.

The new facility opened in 2000 with six beds and space for the CopeLine. The program was formally named the Transitional Living Center, or TLC.

“In 2013, the board received an additional state capital grant to expand the facility, increasing capacity to nine beds,” Ms. Dykes continued. “In 2024, we received additional grants from Ohio Department of Behavioral

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able to approve,” Ms. Hulsmann said.

The county has 14 licensed homes and five kinship homes licensed as foster homes, so they can take their kin as well as others. As of now, four home studies are ongoing. “That’s a lot at one time,” she added.

As of now, JFS has 22 children in its custody, and nine more children are placed in either a kinship home or a group home, still working with JFS.

JFS is putting on a 5K and mile walk on May 30.

“It’s a time to get together for the community to thank our foster parents as well as saying that we do need more foster parents,” Ms. Hulsmann said. “I think it’s important to be out in the community and really just get everyone together and just open the door to communication about the topic.”

She said even though JFS has a decent number of foster homes, most of its homes are geared toward younger children. Only one home can take children over 12 years old.

“That is a very big problem that we have right now,” she said. “We really are in need of homes for teenagers. People are a little bit nervous about teenagers, but really, once they get the help that they need, they’re not so scary.”

She said she hopes to reach more families open to teenagers in the next year or so.

Respite foster care

Fostering does not have to be for extended periods of time.

“We’ll take anything we can get,” Mr. Swenson said. “Even respite foster care is an option for families.”

He likened the concept to babysitting, noting that respite foster care can last for short-term periods – even just for a dinner.

“We need some help with people who want to have teenagers in their homes – which is a big ask – but even respite for teenagers would be really helpful,” Ms. Hulsmann said.

“It keeps them in our community,” social services director Gina Schultz said. “They have to be within a certain radius of our agency in order to be certified, and so it’s going to keep them closer to home, possibly in the same school district, easier to have visitation with their parents to work on reunification.”

Commissioner Carolyn Brakey asked where kids go if the county has insufficient homes.

In that case, they go outside the county, Ms. Hulsmann said.

“We have a pool of therapeutic foster homes that we look at,” she said. “We’re obviously public. We can look to private agencies who do foster care, and that is, if we don’t have an appropriate home within our county, then we look at the private agency homes.” Therapeutic homes cost a bit more but offer

more training and services, she said.

“But sometimes we’re reaching those homes when we don’t need that therapeutic level, when we have teenagers and things like that,” she said.

JFS tries to find the best fit for kids, Mr. Swenson said, pointing to one placement, an adoptive home in New Mexico.

“We consider the location obviously but we also want it to work out, and we want them to thrive in the homes,” Ms. Hulsmann said.

“Really, what makes a good foster family is someone who’s open to having a child come into their home, open to all different ideas, all different behaviors, things like that, and loving that child as they’re your own, but knowing that the ultimate goal is to get them back to their families,” she said. “That’s a really hard ask, but that is what we’re asking of our foster parents ...”

The first step is to reach out to her. She meets one-on-one with interested residents to explain the whole process. She can be reached at 440-285-1205.

Race to benefit JFS

A 5K run and 1.5-mile walk on May 30 will support the care and well-being of children in Geauga County custody. For more information, visit RunTheLand.com.

“Essentially what we’re doing with the proceeds is we’re paying for the 5K itself