

Program looks at problems of elderly

By Kathy Parriah
staff writer

Aging can lead to mental health problems. And with the number of older people growing each year, there is an increased demand for more mental health services.

Through a new project called "Building Ties," state aging experts hope to find out just what those needs are — and better address them.

Agencies in Oakland and Wayne counties are part of the joint effort by Michigan Office of Services to the Aging (OSA) and the Area Agencies on Aging Association in Michigan. The 12-month federally funded project should result in local plans for dealing with aging problems.

"We want to find out what the linkages are between aging and mental health," explained Albert White, who is project coordinator for the 27-member Wayne County committee.

"And we're looking at how much need there is for mental health services among the aging and what that is."

Funded by a \$110,000 grant from the Administration on Aging, "Building Ties" is one of just two proposals approved by the federal agency. The other is a Wisconsin program in peer counseling for the aged.

THE MICHIGAN program is helping 13 counties develop proposals which would address mental

health needs of residents 55 and over. The project coordinators are also working to get the plans funded.

"We're not promising, but we will try to hustle the money for them," said Carol Tamminga, who with fellow Michigan OSA employee Chuck Maynard is coordinating the project.

"Building Ties" sums up the other goal of the project, which is to get members of the "Aging Network" and "Mental Health System" to work better together.

Tamminga said the Michigan Department of Mental Health's tight budget does not allow it to offer the home services needed by many senior citizens. And many older adults are too proud to seek out help.

"Most are isolated or live independently, don't get out and there's a stigma attached to asking for help. The Mental Health System doesn't go to them and they don't go to Mental Health," Tamminga said.

"And the Aging Network does work in homes, but it doesn't have the psychiatrists and psychologists on staff that the Department of Mental Health does."

"We're trying to get the two together, because people keep falling through the cracks."

Tamminga said there are 1.3 million older adults in Michigan with 15-20 percent of those in need of mental health care. But she said only 4 percent are getting that help.

THE ORIGINAL grant proposal was written by aging and mental health specialist Sally Grady, who is employed by both the OSA and was also on loan to the Department of Mental Health.

Thirteen counties were randomly chosen to participate in "Building Ties." The projects are based in: Mt. Pleasant, Adrian, Bellaire, Pontiac, Lansing, Hart, Detroit, White Cloud, Tawas, Muskegon, Grand Rapids, Saginaw and Traverse City.

In this area, the projects are being overseen by the Detroit-Wayne County Community Mental Health Board with Albert White as project coordinator and the Oakland County Community Mental Health Board with Mary Griffiths as liaison. While "Building Ties" is being coordinated by OSA personnel, each county is looking at its own needs. The goal is to design a program specifically for each community.

So far, Oakland is considering an in-home counseling program. Other areas are looking into solutions like medication monitoring/health care and a geriatric clinic. Half are looking into some form of outreach.



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