

Monday, March 12, 2012|

Faith-based counseling center continues to add services



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Teresa Farkas (right) talks about her inspiration to start Wiregrass Warm Line at Living Waters Counseling Center on Thursday afternoon. Wiregrass Warm Line is a phone number people can call when they're having a bad day and just need someone to talk to. Also pictured are counselor Ginger Mayer and interns Sandra Hunt and Robert Grier (from left).

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HEADLAND, Ala. --

It's a picturesque setting at Living Waters.

A small chapel sits on a hill overlooking a pond, where three resident ducks in search of treats waddle up to visitors. An empty horse barn waits for its future occupants. At the front entrance, a ranch-style counseling center reaches out to individuals and families in need.

With a new tool and a \$250,000 matching grant to construct an activity building and cabins, Living Waters Counseling Center is an eight-year-old vision still in the works. A Christian-based counseling center, the counselors volunteer their services. Clients are not charged. Everything that has gone into the center thus far has been through donations, including the 35 acres it sits on in Henry County.

“We’re being paid on another pay scale,” said Living Waters counselor Ginger Mayer. Living Waters provides individual counseling sessions, art therapy and support group meetings.

In January, the center launched the Wiregrass Warm Line – a phone line people can call when they’re in need. It’s not a crisis line for individuals who are suicidal or in need of more structured counseling. It’s a tool to help people having a difficult time who simply need a friendly listener.

“It’s a friendly ear,” Mayer said. “It’s a friendly heart and a compassionate heart.”

There are currently 20 volunteers who answer calls a week at a time. Volunteers don’t necessarily have counseling degrees, but they’re trained and meet regularly to discuss different scenarios that might arise with phone calls. Should someone who is suicidal call the number, volunteers are trained to keep them on the phone and connect them with 911. The center will also refer people to other services if necessary.

Volunteers man the phone line in the evenings when others may not be available.

“There’s nobody to reach out to, nobody at this time of night you can reach out to,” said Teresa Farkas, a Living Waters volunteer who originally had the idea for the Warm Line. Mayer said state funding cuts and the closure of Alabama’s mental health hospitals will put more pressure on local counseling centers and services. The Alabama Department of Mental Health is closing three of the state’s four mental hospitals, which cost \$106 million a year to operate, and refocusing mental health services at a local level with group homes and other services.

There are plans to add a 3,600-square-foot activity center and five cabins at Living Waters. The addition would allow for counseling seminars, youth retreats, and training activities. Mayer said the property could also double as emergency housing following disasters.

Architectural plans are near completion and Living Waters received a commitment for \$250,000 from the Wiregrass Foundation. The center, however, has to raise another \$250,000. It’s raised \$11,000 since January by sending out letters to supporters.

The center also hopes to add stalls and a paddock area to its horse barn so that it can start equine therapy with three horses that have been donated.

“We are trying to meet the needs of the community,” Mayer said.