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## **Grant Aids Coordination of State Behavioral Health Care Service System**

Lincoln, Neb., Oct. 2, 2002 -- A multimillion-dollar grant received this week by the University of Nebraska [Public Policy Center](#) will result in better coordination of the state's behavioral health care service system.

According to officials at the [Nebraska Health and Human Services System](#), nearly 275,000 Nebraskans confront behavioral health problems ranging from substance abuse to mental illness or eating disorders. The consequences show up in schools and the workplace, even the criminal justice system. Someone with behavioral health needs may require any number of services, ranging from basic information and referral, counseling, transportation, supportive housing, or employment or education assistance.

Many individuals and families have multiple problems, and often there are gaps in services within communities or a lack of accessibility because of long waiting lists. The problems are especially acute in rural communities and poorer areas of cities like Omaha and Lincoln, said George Hanigan, deputy director for behavioral health services for the Nebraska Health and Human Services System. Experts like Alan Tomkins, director of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center and a professor of law and psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, claim that a coordinated and integrated behavioral health care system could help fill some of these gaps.

Nebraska will get a chance to do just that with the receipt of \$1.16 million from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A similar amount will follow for the next two years, totaling more than \$3.7 million. The federal grant, awarded to the Public Policy Center, the coordinator of the project, will allow academics, policymakers, primary care and public health providers and community members across Nebraska to work together to enhance coordination of the behavioral health care system at the state and community levels.

In addition to providing funds to support the development of a coordinated behavioral health system, the grant provides funds that will allow faith- and community-based organizations to fully and effectively participate in such a system.

The opportunity to strategically integrate faith- and community-based organizations into the behavioral health service system is what will help make a major difference in the future, Gov. Mike Johanns said.

"Faith- and community-based organizations are an important part of life in Nebraska," Johanns said. "The project will provide over \$500,000 in technical assistance, case management training, and sub-awards to organizations to improve the quality and accessibility of behavioral health services throughout Nebraska's urban and rural communities."

Such assistance will allow the development of new partnerships and build the capacity of groups willing to help as part of a system of behavioral health care, but often not trained to do so. According to Marilyn Mecham, executive of Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska and a partner in developing the project, "What makes this project particularly important is that it is about social change involving faith communities--making it possible for Nebraskans to help other Nebraskans."

Mary Beth Rathe, interim executive director of Community Action of Nebraska and another project partner, was equally enthusiastic, particularly because the project "will provide technical assistance and help build the capacities of community organizations across the state so they can better meet the needs of consumers and families."

"By coordinating the many efforts of organizations throughout Nebraska, we will create networks among existing community services and bring new partners to the table," said Ron Ross, director of Health and Human Services in Nebraska.

Grant funds will be used to craft a statewide plan for integrated behavioral health care that capitalizes on faith- and community-based resources and skills.

"Often there are gaps in behavioral health services within communities or a lack of accessibility because of long waiting lists," Tomkins said. "Like many states, Nebraska has been taking a serious look at how to create a more seamless system of behavioral health care. One of the objectives of the project is to look at local and state policy solutions for a more integrated system."

Lincoln/Lancaster County is one of many communities that will be involved. Lincoln Mayor Don Wesely said he finds a lot of potential in the project.

"Even in a community like Lincoln, where there is substantial access to high quality services delivered by appropriately trained and experienced professionals, there is still a need to widen our net to make sure all those with needs are properly served," Wesely said.

Omaha Sen. Lowen Kruse, a retired United Methodist Minister concurred. "As touchstones in their communities, faith- and community-based organizations are well

positioned to identify the unique needs, service gaps, and service duplication in Nebraska's communities," he said.

The project brings together representatives from all campuses of the University of Nebraska, numerous state agencies (departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Agriculture, and Housing and Urban Development), the legislature, statewide programs (Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska, Community Action of Nebraska, Nebraska Advocacy Services, Nebraska Investment Finance Authority), local service agencies (First Step Recovery and Wellness Centers of Lincoln and Nebraska City, Lincoln Action Program, Neighborhoods Inc., United Way of the Midlands) and the business community (Gallup Organization). Partners will also include local health departments, primary care and regional mental health providers, schools, religious groups, community foundations, local businesses, the justice and law enforcement systems, social services providers, and medical and behavioral health organizations.

The federal grant funds are part of the Compassion Capital Demonstration Project from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Community Services.

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