

Navigator pilot program first of many 'ripples' from Bridges initiative

Written by Sarah Jane Kyle
May. 23

coloradoan.com

A snapshot view

During the week of Dec. 10-14, Navigator Sarah Morrison-Cohen...

- Enrolled two new participants in her program.
- Had a total of 55 participants in her database.
- Had 83 percent of her clients show up for their appointments.
- Addressed mainly holiday help, mental health and housing issues.

Information provided by Columbine Health Systems

If you're an employee of Columbine Health Systems, Sarah Morrison-Cohen wants you to know that she's in your corner.

Whether it's a car that keeps breaking down, financial struggles or personal matters, she's going to do everything she can to connect you to the resources you need to solve your problems and let you focus on work.

And it's completely confidential.

Morrison-Cohen is the first of her kind: a navigator. Employed by Larimer County Workforce Center through a grant by the Bohemian Foundation, she's stationed at Columbine Health Systems, which has about 1,100 senior residents receiving medical and other aid and housing, as part of a pilot program of Bridges to Success.

The idea is that by addressing issues that impact an employee's ability to work and by taking a more personal approach than provided by a human resources office, Morrison-Cohen can keep more low-wage earners in a job and moving up in a job. The concept is intended to prevent and stop the cycle of poverty.

"It takes the issues that all employers see like tardiness and absenteeism and allows you to see them for what they are: symptoms of underlying problems," she said. "It has the potential to change how businesses work by having a person that can address personal issues that affect the workplace ... it makes sustainable change."

She's been in the job for about four months now, and though she says there always will be a few "hiccups" in people adjusting to the idea, her efforts are showing great potential.

"I think that there's a little discomfort in people in general in looking for help," she said. "People have a hesitance to ask for assistance and that makes sense — I can be the same way."

Gina DiGiallonardo, administrator for the New Mercer Commons assisted living site at Columbine Health Systems, said that though she'll never know which of her employees have seen the navigator or what assistance they've received, she's already seen a marked difference in how her staff operates.

"The benefit to us is being able to show our employees that we have a vested interest in their well-being," DiGiallonardo said. "You don't want someone bringing their personal issues to work, but the reality is that some of our employees do have things going on at home. This gives me a resource to send them to without personally getting involved."

That referral allows her to "do the right thing" and allows Columbine to help their employees while still maintaining a professional distance.

"As a manager, the right thing is not getting involved in someone's life," she said. "I can't delve into their life or figure out how to help them, but now I have someone I know I can trust that can help them ... my employees know I care (because of that) and when employees know you care about them, they work harder for you."

The navigator position is one of many community shifts Sarah Hach, who oversaw the Bridges Out of Poverty program before moving out of state this December, said the Fort Collins community can expect this year.

Bridges to Success is now more than a year old. While the past year has been spent making the community aware and informed on issues of poverty, she hopes that in coming months the community will “take charge” and apply the knowledge to their spheres of influence.

More than 1,300 people were exposed to the Bridges Out of Poverty through formal trainings in 2012.

“The groundwork has been laid, but we as Bohemian never wanted to ‘do onto’ the community,” Hach said. “We wanted to expose the community to these issues and then, if it resonated with them, let them own it. This is the year the community will own this.”

And as that happens, she’s excited to hear just how much the community has changed and evolved.

Hach said she’s confident to leave the program in the hands of Fort Collins.

“You’re going to start to see the ripple effect,” she said. “Focus on community and supporting it.”