

## DMH SUPPORTS WACCAMAW SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES

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Children who are mentally and emotionally healthy are more successful academically and socially. Providing mental health services in schools is an efficient and effective way to address unmet mental health needs and boost student success. Students receiving mental health services in schools also feel less stigmatized, and are more willing to seek help.

For 20 years, The South Carolina Department of Mental Health has been committed to providing mental health services in schools and has had one of the leading school-based programs in the country. Waccamaw Center for Mental Health (WCMH) is on the cutting-edge of these programs.

State Director John H. Magill recently met with WCMH school-based counselors LaToya Simmons, LPC, and Elizabeth Nixon, LPC, LPC/S. Simmons and Nixon have both worked with WCMH for over 10 years. Both counselors have been recognized as Child and Adolescent Outstanding Employee of the Year and serve as mentors to other staff members. They are dedicated to the children and families they serve. Both are team players and part of the school culture and community.

They go above and beyond the call of duty, frequently helping parents and teachers after business hours and on weekends.

Lori Chappelle, director of Children's Services, Samantha Paggeot, LPC, School-Based Services coordinator, and Eryn Bergeron, LISW-CP, School-Based Services supervisor, oversee the WCMH school-based program and keep it running smoothly. School-based counselors are employed by WCMH but embedded in the

schools. In FY 12, 29 WCMH mental health professionals provided counseling services to students and their families in 34 schools in Horry, Georgetown, and Williamsburg counties.

WCMH school-based counselors provided more than 23,000 hours of service to 1,375 children. Chappelle said, "Although numbers are often used to show the impact of treatment, we focus on the quality of services provided to children, youth, and families. We want to know the time families spend with us is meaningful and beneficial to their lives."

According to four students in the Myrtle Beach High School school-based program, Simmons is helping them tremendously. The students told Magill that Simmons teaches them to think of possible consequences of their actions, quoting her slogan to "begin with the end in mind." The students said Simmons is like another parent, expressed feelings of mutual respect, and described her as someone they can talk to about anything.

School-based counselors are able to work with difficult students regularly and handle crisis episodes on-site. Simmons said, "The key to my job is building trust. I keep in touch with many of my clients after they graduate high school and I'm happy to say I've attended many former clients' college graduations."

Students are most commonly referred to the school-based program for disruptive and aggressive behaviors but may be referred for a variety of other reasons, including attention deficit issues, trauma issues, such as family violence, abuse and neglect,



*LaToya Simmons and Tiesha Graham*



*Samantha Paggeot, Lori Chappelle, and Eryn Bergeron*



*Jackie Green, Elizabeth Nixon, Linette Nichols, Natasha Casler*

and mood disorders such as depression, bipolar, and anxiety disorders.

Both Simmons and Nixon are trained in Trauma Focused-Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), which is designed to reduce negative emotional and behavioral responses following traumatic events. The treatment, based on learning and cognitive theories, addresses distorted beliefs and attributions related to abuse and provides a supportive environment in which children are encouraged to talk about their traumatic experience. TF-CBT also helps parents cope effectively with their

own emotional distress and develop skills that support their children.

While visiting Socastee Elementary School, Magill met with three parents of clients of school-based counselor Nixon. The parents agreed that she gives them the most important thing: hope, and they couldn't do without her. Linette Nichols said, "Mrs. Nixon has been an absolute angel, not only for my son, but for me. She helps me to cope and I no longer feel like I am going through this alone. Mrs. Nixon is the only one my son trusts. If he has an issue, she can calm him

down. I can work because my son can make it through the day at school without me having to come get him because of disruptive behavior."

At its funding peak in FY08, WCMH's school-based program had a presence in 67 schools, in FY12 it fell to a low of 34. Many agencies are facing difficult economic circumstances. WCMH has seen a decrease in state funding over the last three years, and lost financial support from Horry and Georgetown County schools. Despite not having direct financial

support from those school districts, WCMH continues to provide school-based services.

"Early detection and treatment of mental illness can greatly improve a child's quality of life. By redirecting a young person toward the right path; we may reduce the severity or possibly eliminate later mental health problems. About a third of the Department of Mental Health's resources go to Children and Adolescent services. I support the school-based program because it's the right thing to do," said Magill.