

Little-Known State Service Helping 600-Plus People with Mental Illness

by Bend Weekly News Sources

A small state program aimed at helping keep Medicaid-eligible Oregonians with severe psychiatric disabilities from needing expensive institutional care has passed the 600 mark.

The program, begun in 1999, provides a personal-care assistant for up to 20 hours a month to help with chores such as doing laundry, light housekeeping, grocery shopping, planning meals, arranging medical appointments and managing medications. It reached 604 Oregonians in the most recent reporting period.

Oregon is believed to be among a handful of states offering such Medicaid services to people with serious mental illness; most states provides such services only to people with physical and developmental disabilities.

"These low-cost services help people with psychiatric disabilities live outside institutions, prevent or delay their need for full-time nursing care and support the services of the local community mental health system," said Bob Nikkel, Oregon Department of Human Services assistant director for addictions and mental health.

Personal care assistants are paid \$8.57 an hour; by contrast, DHS reimburses nursing facilities an average of \$5,200 a month for Medicaid-eligible people.

Without such assistance, Nikkel said, people with psychiatric disabilities sometimes run out of food, don't prepare food, miss medical appointments or feel stress about poor personal or household hygiene. One such individual is a Tillamook man in his 40s, in and out of the State Hospital for years, who now lives independently and has assistance with personal and household hygiene, managing his medications and eating a nutritious diet.

The program for people with severe mental illness is available in all but Columbia and Harney counties.

Counties with the largest number of people in the program are Lane (109), Multnomah (49), Jackson (44), Washington (40), Linn (39), Marion (30) and Polk (29).

To qualify, an individual must be Medicaid-eligible, live independently and require assistance with an activity of daily living such as basic personal hygiene, nutrition or medical assistance. People interested in learning more about the program may contact their county mental health department (phone number is in the phone book's blue Government pages).

The program is managed jointly by the DHS Addictions and Mental Health Division and DHS Seniors and People with Disabilities Division.

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