

Deschutes County notifies mental health clients of missing records

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

BEND, Ore. -- On Saturday, May 3, the Deschutes County Mental Health Department sent certified letters to 50 individuals who received services from the Department during 2005-06. The letters inform the clients that the location of their copied service documents, mailed through the U.S. Postal Service to the State, is unknown. The letter also offers assistance from Department staff and a free credit monitoring service to each person for the next 12 months.

The Department provided mental health services to more than 3,400 clients during the year in question. No other current or former clients are affected by this situation.

The missing copies were hand-delivered to the U.S. Post Office in Bend. The State's Provider Audit Unit reports that the materials were not received at the office in Salem. The State auditor who requested the information and Deschutes County staff continue to try to trace and locate the documents. This effort includes contacts with multiple Postal Service locations. As of Monday, the documents have not been located.

The Department mailed the information in response to a letter from the State of Oregon Department of Human Services requiring the County to provide information for a specific list of clients. For each person, the request related to services completed in 2005-06. The request was part of a routine data review conducted by the State's Office of Payment Accuracy and Recovery. That office monitors health agencies to help ensure the correct use of Federal Medicaid funds.

Originals of all documents remain in the possession of the Mental Health Department. The requested information is being reassembled and will be hand-delivered to the manager of the Audit Unit this week.

While there is no evidence that the missing records have been used inappropriately, staff in the Deschutes County Mental Health Department are treating the matter seriously. Protecting health information is a matter of critical importance to the Department. Since being notified of the missing copies, the Department's information request process has been evaluated. Even though the process was proven sound, and no legal violations were found, Mental Health continues to review its processes for protecting and providing health records. The County's Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliance officer met with Department staff last week. He reviewed and approved the Department's current document processing practices.

According to www.oregon.gov, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) is the first comprehensive federal protection of individual privacy. The U.S. Congress passed the act in 1996. It also sets national standards to protect personal health information, reduces health care fraud and waste through standardized electronic transactions and codes, and makes health coverage more portable. The Mental Health Department also operates within requirements and guidelines established by the State of Oregon.

Anyone affected by this situation will receive a certified letter with contact information and instructions to receive the credit report service.

The Deschutes County Mental Health Department provides and contracts for mental health and alcohol and drug services for residents of Deschutes County. The Department also provides help for people with developmental disabilities and their families. The Mental Health Department's general phone number is 322-7500.

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