

CAPITAL AREA COUNSELING SERVICE



INNOVATION STORY
No 1

Help Around the Corner

STORY BY
Tanya Manus

Capital Area Counseling Service is a nonprofit mental health agency-focused on suicide prevention and addiction treatment. Its 100 licensed clinicians, paraprofessionals and administrative staff provide services for a nine-county area in central South Dakota.



**“You don’t just take on
big projects without a lot
of people supporting
the vision.”**

Dennis Pfrimmer
Capital Area Counseling Service

YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 1968

GEOGRAPHY
South Dakota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$1M – \$4,999,999

LEADER
Dennis Pfrimmer

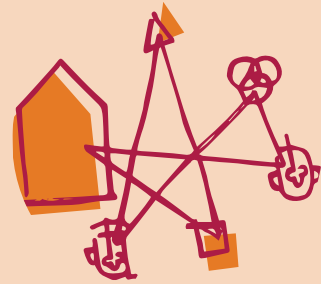
INNOVATION

CAPITAL AREA COUNSELING SERVICE

CACS takes a comprehensive approach to supporting people facing mental health or addiction crises, identifying people and organizations that are well equipped to be partners in the work.

Breakthrough

CACS has developed strong partnerships with government officials, educational and health institutions and community members — but it isn't afraid to lead from the front on new ideas. The Mobile Crisis Response mental health program is a product of both CACS' collaborative spirit and a rejection of the status quo.



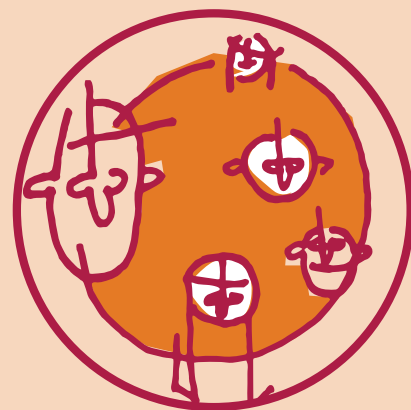
Working the Network

Pierre is a tight-knit community, and CACS worked hard to gain trust and get community support to expand the services it offers. The team took intentional steps to build partnerships with a diverse set of stakeholders, including hospitals, schools and law enforcement.



Finding the Right People

CACS places a premium on bringing the right people into its work, from getting its board more involved to finding the right people for its staff with a process focused on finding colleagues who share the organization's values — collaboration, cooperation and empowerment.



INCLUSIVE



COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY



PROACTIVE

Before 2015, a desperate 911 call from someone in Pierre, South Dakota, on the verge of suicide might have involved a patrol car, an emergency room and a psychiatric hospital.

A person distraught over their family farm's financial struggles, an abusive relationship or even the stress of after-Christmas bills might find themselves being transported by police to a law enforcement or medical facility hundreds of miles from home. The lack of emergency mental health care options was a community crisis.

By the time a distressed person called 911, they might have been waiting to see a local counselor for three to six weeks, recalls Dr. Mikel Holland, chief medical officer for Avera St. Mary's Hospital in Pierre. Because of increasingly strict health care regulations, the hospital's crisis room had closed. Avera St. Mary's

is not a licensed mental health hospital and therefore is limited in its ability to assist with mental health emergencies. This forced law enforcement to handle the crisis calls.

Derald Gross, patrol captain for the Pierre Police Department, says his officers often responded to mental health issues for which they weren't trained, and the sight of officers sometimes agitated a person already on the edge of crisis. If a suicidal individual seemed to be a risk to themselves or others, they were handcuffed, taken to the local emergency room for an assessment and ultimately transferred to a mental health facility in Yankton, Sioux Falls or Aberdeen, South Dakota — all hours away from Pierre.

Within 48 hours, the facility would release the person and send them home, Dr. Holland says. Sometimes only days passed before the person would make another 911 call and the cycle would repeat.

Today, when police receive a 911 call about a person considering suicide, the response is dramatically different. Through the innovative Mobile Crisis

Sometimes only days passed before the person would make another 911 call and the cycle would repeat.

“Most people are OK as long as they know there’s help that’s just right around the corner.”

Dr. Mikel Holland
Capital Area Counseling Service

Response program run by Capital Area Counseling Service, that person receives immediate aid. Mobile Crisis Response sends licensed therapists directly to those in emergency mental health situations at the request of police. Capital Area Counseling Service’s CEO and seven other licensed counselors share the task of being on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“The biggest part of Mobile Crisis Response is that we’re going to come evaluate the person and see if they have a spouse or relative that can be with them and keep them safe, and then we can get them into treatment or counseling within the next couple of days. Most people are OK as long as they know there’s help that’s just right around the corner,” Dr. Holland says.

In the program’s first 24 months, Mobile Crisis Response counselors were able to stabilize crisis situations and provide outpatient treatment in Pierre 74 percent of the time. The city’s police officers now spend less time handling mental health issues and more time on other community needs, Pierre Police Chief Jason Jones says.

He praised CACS’ willingness to partner with law enforcement and extend its limited resources.

“It takes that cooperative effort among the assets you do have and jointly wrapping your mind around a plan to build solutions,” Chief Jones says.

Hughes County Sheriff Darin Johnson says the sheriff’s department still transports people when needed, but Mobile Crisis Response has reduced the number by about 30 percent. Before Mobile Crisis Response, about every three days sheriff’s officers took someone to Yankton. Each trip required eight or more hours on the road.

“By installing the Mobile Crisis Response idea into the process, it gets the person talking to someone in a shirt and jeans rather than a badge and a gun,” says Sheriff Johnson, who admits he was pleasantly surprised at the program’s effectiveness. “It’s probably easier for someone to be open and honest with Mobile Crisis Response. In the long run, it’s better for the mental health of the person.”



Pierre, South Dakota



Pierre, South Dakota

CHARACTERISTIC
No
1



INCLUSIVE

**HOW CAN
NON-NATIVE-LED
ORGANIZATIONS
THAT WORK WITH
NATIVE COMMUNITIES
BETTER CONNECT
THEIR WORK TO THE
CULTURE OF THOSE
COMMUNITIES?**

“Organizations need someone knowledgeable in Native American cultures and traditions. The best idea would be to look to Native communities being served as a resource. Here at CACS, we have staff well versed in Native American traditions and cultures. In our therapeutic foster care program, we have staff teaching children and youth Native American values, culture and language as well as giving them the opportunity to participate in ceremonies so that they can maintain their connection to their tribe as well as their home community.”

Carrie Ward
Capital Area Counseling Service



Building Personal Relationships



Local Connections



Pierre/Fort Pierre Mental Health Task Force

“We’ve all put
our hearts and
souls into this
mission.”

Mary Turner
Capital Area Counseling Service



Ministerium



Centered in Service

WORKING THE NETWORK

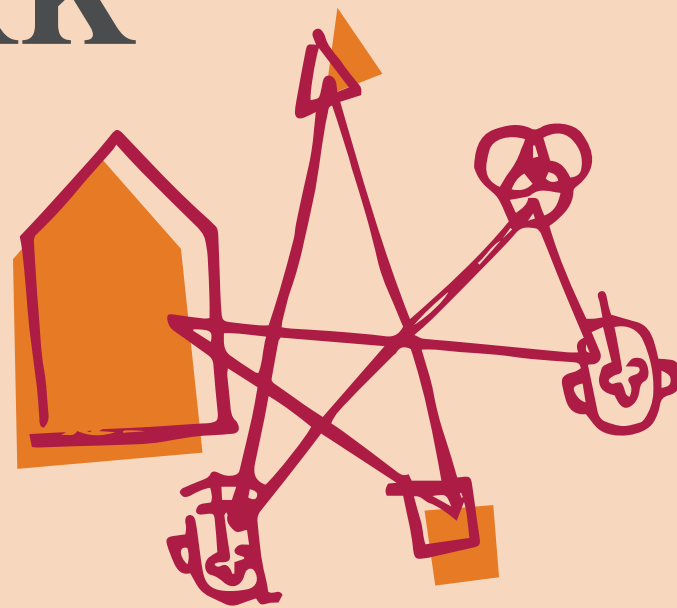
Collaboration is vital in Pierre and Fort Pierre, which have limited resources and a combined population of 16,000.

CACS serves those towns and the mostly rural counties nearby. The region's residents include farmers, ranchers and Native American communities — all populations that are at a higher than average risk of suicide.

Mobile Crisis Response grew out of CACS' participation in the Pierre/Fort Pierre mental health task force. The all-volunteer task force formed in response to a spate of local teen suicides in the 1990s.

"Pierre is such a small, tight-knit community. We all know each other," Captain Gross says. "All the community leaders wanted to find a solution [to the suicides]."

Representatives from the sheriff's department, the police department, Pierre and Fort Pierre government agencies, St. Mary's and CACS met to discuss solutions. Out of that came the mental health task force, which also includes medical professionals, clergy, the Department of Social Services and local educators. The task force worked



to develop Mobile Crisis Response so people in need could receive appropriate mental health care more quickly.

"Providing Mobile Crisis Response would not have happened if CACS had tried to do it alone. It takes partnership with law enforcement and the jail to ensure safety. The hospital, schools and other providers had to recognize the need for it," President and CEO Dennis Pfrimmer says. "It takes a community with the same purpose in mind to make this work."

Intentionally building relationships and partnerships was one of Dennis' first steps when he became CEO in 2001. CACS joined the Pierre Area Chamber of Commerce and a statewide association of mental health centers and addiction providers.



Pierre, South Dakota



Capital Area Counseling Service Offices

CHARACTERISTIC
No
2



COMMITMENT
TO COMMUNITY

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS USE CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS TO DEVELOP, MAINTAIN OR INCREASE SERVICES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

"Developing partnerships requires an organization to be humble and not only identify the resources they have but also acknowledge the resources they don't have and ask for help from others. Then it's about the community, not the organization. Leaders of organizations need to avoid guarding their "turf" and see the benefits of collaboration to the community at large. For example, with limited financial and human resources, the Boys & Girls Club of Pierre reached out to CACS to help stabilize the club and get it on solid footing. CACS bought and now operates the Boys & Girls Club of the Capital Area."

Dennis Pfrimmer

Capital Area Counseling Service

“It takes a community with the same purpose in mind to make this work.”

Dennis Pfrimmer
Capital Area Counseling Service

“CACS for years operated below the radar in the community,” Dennis says. “If you’re going to run a successful nonprofit where you have the goodwill of the community, 60 percent of your time needs to be spent outside of the organization and in the community.”

The community gained confidence in CACS. Dennis’ willingness to expand the agency beyond its outpatient mental health and addiction services empowered CACS to fill multiple needs. CACS’ therapeutic foster care program, for example, incorporates mental health care and places groups of siblings together in foster families. That program developed through a collaboration between CACS and the Department of Social Services to address the shortage of foster families in South Dakota, Dennis says.

The Central South Dakota Teen Court and local Boys & Girls Club were struggling nonprofits that each approached CACS

for support — Dennis’ team stepped in with financial resources to stabilize each program and took over operations of both.

Additionally, CACS runs Capital Area Housing Corporation, which operates two group homes for adults with mental illness.

“We have people coming to Capital Area Counseling Service from all sectors of the community, and that wasn’t always the case,” Dennis says.

CACS is able to manage its diverse programs because of community partners, staff and board of directors who are all willing to collaborate on innovative solutions.

“You don’t just take on big projects without a lot of people supporting the vision,” Dennis says. “It doesn’t work smoothly all the time, but because we all work so closely, we don’t hold that against each other. We know each other enough that we don’t doubt each other.”

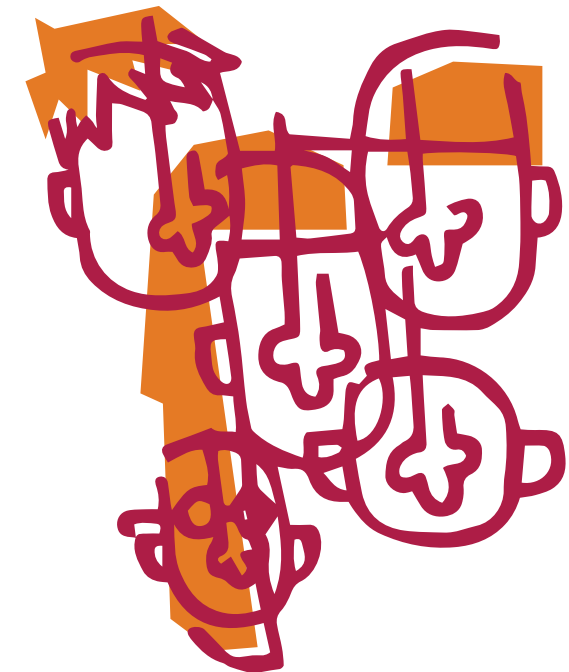
FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Capital Area Counseling Service’s growth is fueled by vision and innovation, for which Dennis credits CACS’ board of directors and staff.

They, in turn, are quick to say he is the visionary. Clinical director Jennifer Gray describes Dennis as a leader who is continually looking to promote the organization and take it to the next level.

CACS has existed since 1968, but at the time Dennis became CEO, the agency faced financial crisis and instability. Previous CACS directors had each stayed about two and a half years. “Most organizations can’t withstand that kind of turnover at the top,” Dennis says.

Dennis initiated CACS’ biggest paradigm shift in 2008. He set out to reduce turnover and improve services by hiring people who were passionate about CACS’ emotionally taxing work. Now, CACS’ fine-tuned hiring process requires the most qualified applicants to read a summary of business consultant Jim Collins’ book “Good to Great” and write an essay. Applicants go through two interviews that incorporate open-ended, unorthodox questions and prompts, such as “Tell us about your favorite vacation.”



“This is not a board where you sit back and watch the CEO work.”

Mary Turner
Capital Area Counseling Service

“We don’t focus a lot on practical knowledge; we want to know who the person is. We feel we can help them learn [on the job]. It’s made a huge difference,” Dennis says.

Clinical specialist Emmalee Statz-Krekelberg, who provides psychiatric rehabilitation services to adults with mental illness, joined CACS in 2017. She values CACS’ focus — stated in its application packet — on collaboration, cooperation and empowerment. “If I am struggling and I ask my team, I can get a variety of ideas. I know I will always have support, and it won’t be held against me,” Emmalee says.

“It takes a lot of the right people doing this work for a long time to make a difference in the community,” Dennis says. “Recruiting is a huge issue, and we make it tough because we’re picky. We’re looking to find the right person. Figuring out a job for them is the easy part.”

Over the past decade, Dennis has also strategically cultivated an ambitious 12-member board of directors. Taking

more inspiration from Jim Collins, CACS identified values and goals it wants in board members. Dennis and CACS staff maintain an extensive list of people they believe will support CACS’ vision. Dennis and current board members meet individually with potential recruits.

“It’s all about the people. Who’s in this community that’s doing great stuff? We keep [asking them to join] until they say yes,” Dennis chuckled.

Attracting the right board members got easier as CACS became an active part of the community. “Early on, quality board members [joined] because they believed in me and maybe they had personal situations where they knew CACS was important,” Dennis says. “Now, they say, ‘I want to be part of that group. That group is going somewhere.’”

While Dennis oversees CACS programs and employees, the board’s role is overseeing finance and infrastructure projects and planning for a smooth transition after Dennis retires.



Pierre, South Dakota



Capital Area Counseling Service Offices

CHARACTERISTIC

No

3



PROACTIVE

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS CREATE A CULTURE IN WHICH EVERYONE WORKS TOGETHER AND FEELS VALUED?

“In order to build a culture, you have to have it come from top down. Leadership has to demonstrate and follow the core values that have been established. We’re intentional about making time to connect in different ways: Six times a year, we have all-staff meetings and trainings. We all eat lunch together for some fellowship. We talk about personal events we can celebrate together. We dress up for Halloween, we have a Christmas office-door decorating contest and we share photos of those on Facebook. We also take time to recognize staff who have gone above and beyond. Staff pitching in helps to create a culture of partnership — everyone working together to help everyone we serve.”

Jennifer Gray

Capital Area Counseling Service



Mobile Crisis Response



Influencing Policy



Group Homes



“This is not a board where you sit back and watch the CEO work. You are expected to participate and make a difference in the community and be a go-getter in your own way,” board member Mary Turner says. “We’ve all put our hearts and souls into this mission.”

Doneen Hollingsworth has chaired CACS’ board since 2017. Retired from the South Dakota Department of Health, she serves on the Boys & Girls Club board as well. The CACS board also includes a salesman, bankers, an attorney, educators and a retired audiologist. Their combined skills and experience equip CACS to take on major projects, such as recent fundraising campaigns for new Capital Area Counseling Service and Boys & Girls Club buildings.

“The different talents board members bring to help the organization accomplish its mission and the types of people on the board ensure that we are part of the community,” Hollingsworth says. “Our role as a board is not to stand in the way of the vision of the leadership team at Capital Area Counseling Service but to provide support. Not to question why but ask how we can help.”

“Our role as a board is not to question why but ask how we can help.”

Doneen Hollingsworth
Capital Area Counseling Service



Pierre/Fort Pierre Mental Health Task Force



Safe at Home Plan



Capital Area Counseling Service Offices