

CONNECTIONS

About Connections

Connections is an innovative, convenient and consumer-friendly center offering one-stop information, referral and assistance for mental health and substance abuse needs. It is a collaborative effort of the Health District and the Larimer Center for Mental Health, both of which contribute staff and funding.

Connections grew from work by the Community-wide Mental Health and Substance Abuse Partnership of Larimer County. A report issued by the partnership in 2001 called for the creation of an improved, integrated and comprehensive information and referral system for mental health and substance abuse. Subsequent work resulted in the Health District and the Larimer Center for Mental Health combining and enhancing their respective mental health/substance abuse services to create Connections.

Connections aims to reduce barriers to receiving mental health and substance abuse care, simplify access to services, and provide immediate access to information that consumers need. Services provided by Connections will focus on the unique needs of each consumer, build on consumer strengths, and will involve consumers in all aspects of decision-making about their care. Staff will aim to provide consumers with as much information and as many options as possible and will be a bridge to services. Connections staff strive to provide a welcoming atmosphere to all consumers. The Connections program was designed, and continues to take direction from input from consumers, service providers, and other community representatives.

Services include:

- Needs assessment
- Information on and referral to mental health and substance abuse resources
- Help connecting to affordable services
- Brief intervention
- Crisis intervention
- Care coordination
- Consumer advocacy

Connections is located at the Larimer Center for Mental Health, 525 W. Oak St., Fort Collins, Colorado. Consumers can access services in the following ways:

- In person, either walk-in or by appointment, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- By telephone, at 970-221-5551, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. After-hours crisis services are also available at that number.
- A searchable database of mental health counselors, programs, support groups and classes is available on the Internet at www.mentalhealthconnection.org

Internship Opportunities

As the entry point for many into the mental health and substance abuse system in Larimer County, Connections is a hub of diverse activity, and a rich training-ground for those who want to commit themselves to adding value in the mental health field.

Interns are usually placed as Mental Health Specialists on the Connections Team. As such, they have the opportunity to be involved in the provision of all services offered by Connections, including on-call duties which consist of seeing walk-in clients and taking direct phone calls. They have the opportunity to do a great deal of assessment, risk assessment, crisis intervention, information and referral, care coordination, and brief intervention.

Initially, the intern is expected to review the staff training/policy and procedure manual, and to progress through the training process in much the same manner as a hired Specialist. Interns are trained on

tracking software and procedures, referral procedures, community resources, etc. As their first experience with clients, the intern will listen in on telephone contacts and will sit in with staff as they work directly with clients. They will progress through various levels of clinical responsibility, including working with clients while another staff member sits in, and being on-call while other staff members are available for consultation. The intern is ultimately integrated into the on-call schedule at Connections, and acts as a full staff Specialist once their training is complete.

While opportunities for experiencing various levels of case management abound at Connections, opportunities for actual on going or traditional therapy in this internship are limited. The intern will be expected to take on a brief intervention caseload, which will usually consist of one to five individuals depending on the number of hours the intern is on site weekly. Brief intervention cases are usually two to five sessions in length and use a solution-focused brief therapy model. While family members may be involved in these sessions, it is not often marriage and family counseling. Some opportunities for group facilitation may exist either at Connections or at the Larimer Center for Mental Health. Taping and/or videotaping of brief intervention sessions is available as needed. Interns do have more flexibility than regular staff for extending their “brief intervention” cases longer than five sessions when appropriate in order to gain that experience.

The intern will also have opportunities for accompanying staff on mobile evaluations at Mountain Crest Behavioral Healthcare Center, the Larimer County Detention Center, and at Poudre School District among others. Opportunities may also exist for interns to gain experience making educational presentations about various mental health topics, or to educate the community about the services available through the Connections Program.

For students who wish for an even wider range of experiences, an internship through the Larimer Center for Mental Health (LCMH) is possible with a rotation through Connections, or the student can also rotate through certain teams at LCMH while doing their internship at Connections.

Supervision and Continuing Education Opportunities

The intern is assigned an on-site clinical supervisor and receives regular weekly supervision. A number of licensed staff with experience as clinical supervisors are available on site, including, at this time, Ph.D. level psychologists, Licensed Clinical Social Workers, and Licensed Professional Counselors. We also have CAC III certified clinicians who are available to help with substance abuse and co-occurring disorder issues.

The Connections team offers ample opportunities for informal consultation with staff. Staff members enjoy being involved in the internship experience, and are always willing to sit in with the intern on a session, provide information and resources to the intern, or staff a case with them to offer another perspective.

Interns are also invited and encouraged to attend group case staffings, which currently take place each Thursday morning from 8:00 – 9:30 a.m. During these meetings, clinical cases are discussed, brief intervention cases are staffed, policy and procedural information is reviewed, and educational speakers are often brought in.

Other opportunities for continuing education are often present. In the past year, Connections has brought in speakers on Harm Reduction, Motivational Interviewing, and Vicarious Traumatization, and has had the opportunity to attend free community trainings on Co-Occurring Disorders, Childhood Mental Illness and many other topics. The Larimer Center for Mental Health has a brown-bag luncheon series, as well as often bringing in pharmaceutical representatives to discuss recent advances in our clinical and medical knowledge of mental health and substance abuse.

Who Is a Good Match for a Connections Internship?

Generally, a good match for a Connections internship is someone who has already had significant clinical experience and has developed at least a basic level of assessment, diagnostic, and clinical abilities.

Interns must be ready for an experience that can sometimes be intense due to the rigors of being on-call and having to react quickly to the client's presenting issues without time for preparation. They must be quick learners who are able to connect well with a wide range of clientele, from the chronic and persistent mentally ill, to those with personality disorders, and those with varying cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, including very low-income individuals.

An Internship at Connections may not be the right fit for those students who are seeking a great deal of traditional counseling experience, or those who must do a significant amount of marriage and family sessions. However, the Intern who seeks a well-rounded experience, complete with ample opportunities to learn assessment and diagnosis, crisis intervention, care coordination, information and referral and brief intervention skills, will find it at Connections.

Attributes of the Successful Mental Health Specialist

Mental Health Specialists who are successful and satisfied in their positions at Connections are a unique group with a very special set of skills. Generally, they enjoy crisis intervention, work well under pressure, and can handle varying paces including very slow days and days where the action doesn't let up for a minute. They also are able to recognize the necessity of doing both good solid clinical work with individuals as well as the need to provide care coordination, outreach, and follow-up. They embody the Connections philosophy of being client-centered and involving the client in identifying goals, determining their options and making decisions about their care. They are able to identify when they need to back off and empower a client to take action, and when they need to "hold a client's hand" to make sure they get the care they need. Successful Connections Specialists are able to maintain a welcoming attitude to everyone, regardless of their behavior or readiness for change. At the same time, our Specialists have very solid skills in setting and enforcing boundaries and limits with clients.

While the entering intern may not possess all of these skills and traits, the successful intern will leave their experience at Connections richer in all respects.