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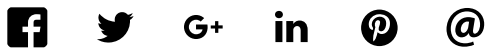
TOP STORY

## Rogers County Youth Services receives seal of transparency

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GuideStar Platinum Seal of Transparency



Rogers County Youth Services, the Claremore-based non-profit, was recently recognized with the GuideStar Platinum Seal of Transparency, to honor to organization's commitment to transparency in the use and results of donations.

RCYS Executive Director Herb McSpadden said transparency is important to RCYS because, "We want to make sure that when people donate to us, they are aware of what they are giving to and that the money they give is going to services, not being wasted."

GuideStar is a free, online, searchable database of over two million national nonprofits, which gives users access to all of the publicly available information about any given nonprofit.

The platinum designation is the highest level of recognition offered by GuideStar, an opt-in service where nonprofits can give the website more information about themselves than that found in IRS records.

According to the GuideStar website, Platinum is useful because it demonstrates that an organization is focused on measuring progress and results, it shows improvement year over year and it provides a concrete alternative to donors evaluating overhead ratio.

RCYS provided the website with all of the following information regarding the nonprofit's operations.

The organizations annual budget of just over \$560,000 is allocated toward counseling services, the Love and Logic Parenting Program, the Parenting Through Divorce Program, the family academy program, life skills training, the iCrimes program and the U-Turn Academy Program.

The largest portion, \$345,000, pays the salaries of five, full-time, masters-level therapists who provide counseling services, including prevention and intervention services to at-risk youth and families.

The average number of counseling recipients per month began to decrease in 2014, when counseling services were reduced to maintain a residential service for kids in foster care.

The organization gave direct counseling to an average of 133 people a month in 2015, 100 a month in 2016, 110 a month in 2017, and more than 200 a month in 2018.

Numbers spiked in 2018 when the non-profit dissolved their residential services and expanded their other programs.

"Each one of our therapists will carry a caseload of approximately 20 individuals or families," McSpadden said, which is about 10 fewer cases than the average for-profit counseling service. "We scale it back so that we can provide more individual focus and so that our therapists can go into schools to do crisis intervention and prevention programs."

The Love and Logic Parenting Program, budgeted \$10,000, is a free program designed to provide a common sense approach to parenting that focuses on natural consequences and the value of positive parenting.

Parenting Through Divorce is a free, court mandated program covering: the short and long term effects of divorce on children; the possibility of reconciliation; the effects of family violence; understanding your child's current emotional state; effective co-parenting and area resources for the family. This program costs approximately \$15,000.

McSpadden said that the Parenting Through Divorce program was added in response to a need in the community, because the state-required classes were not being offered locally.

Family Academy is a free program that works with youth who have broken the law and students having behavior problems in school to develop skills which minimize the likelihood of repeating their mistakes and empower them to have positive control of their lives. The cost is approximately \$15,000.

RCYS has hosted this program for over 20 years, and has followed up with every student who has gone through it.

“Ninety percent of the kids who complete the program never commit another crime,” McSpadden said.

Life skills training is done by request, with \$40,000 budgeted each year. Certified instructors of the evidence-based Botvin Life Skills curriculum give free presentations to area 4th, 5th and 6th grade students, with proven success reducing drug use, alcohol use, violence, and tobacco use.

The Botvin curriculum is taught in the classroom for a semester, where the student's regular teacher and the life skills instructor co-teach. Students have work books for the skills and take pre- and post-training tests to assess how much students learned from the lessons.

“It teaches the kids how to say no to peer pressure, how to have better self-esteem, how to watch out for and take care of each other and it builds empathy,” McSpadden said.

There has been a steady rise in the number of K-12 students taught the life skills material since 2014, from 220 to 320 in 2018, and an expected 600 in 2019.

The iCrimes program, implemented in Aug., 2018, is budgeted \$35,000.

“The victims of crimes unit from the district attorney’s office approached us about services for victims of sextortion — kids who have been blackmailed or extorted into sharing inappropriate pictures of themselves,” McSpadden said. “As we looked into that, we realized that it was a huge problem in the schools.”

RCYS therapists received special training on counseling victims of sex crimes and cyber abuse, and were also given the tools to teach preventative classes at Rogers County schools and community groups.

So far, Foyil and Claremore Public Schools have held classes or assemblies about the topic and other local schools have expressed interest in having someone come speak to students.

“Almost everybody has a smartphone with a camera. Most kids just don’t know that it’s a crime to share inappropriate pictures or even possess those pictures on their phones,” McSpadden said.

In addition to the fear of criminal charges, instructors tell the students how such images have been used to harm and bully students, and where they can turn for help if they become the victim of such a crime.

Finally, students with long-term school suspension can attend the free U-Turn Academy, which provides supervised education by a certified teacher and an assistant Monday-Friday, free lunch, individual and group counseling and life skills groups weekly.

“We have a great success rate of kids who have been suspended from school, returning to school and completing their education,” McSpadden said, about 80 percent. “Statistically, for kids that have had long-term suspensions, the success rate for returning back to school is not very high.”

Part of the success rate comes from having dedicated professionals on staff who know what they are doing and genuinely care about the kids, McSpadden said. It also helps that the non-profit is giving students a place where they don’t have to fall behind just because they are out of the classroom for an extended period of time.

“Schools have changed a lot,” McSpadden said. “Kids can get a long-term suspension for things today that 15 years ago the principal might have just talked to you.”

Kids can get long-term suspensions for bringing a weapon to school, even if it is left in their vehicle, fighting can result in a much as a month out of school, and any level of drug possession is an automatic suspension.

“It doesn’t mean they are bad kids. They’ve had some unfortunate circumstances,” McSpadden said. “We’re supporting them, helping them stay on track with their school and helping them fix the bad decisions that they made.”

U-Turn is budgeted \$60,000.

Listed on GuideStar was the organizations plans for 2019, which go beyond moving into their new facility to include: having five dedicated therapists taking referrals from nine Rogers County School Districts; adding two additional counseling staff to provide increased services to each school system; providing life skills training in every Rogers County School District by 2021; hiring two licensed drug and alcohol treatment providers and contracting with an experienced service provider specializing in sexual misbehavior.

“With the expansion of counseling and prevention services as well as the development of new programs, RCYS will provide counseling services to approximately 500 individuals and families this year, and approximately 850 individuals and families in FY21,” GuideStar indicates, “Through our education and prevention groups/classes, RCYS will provide services to an estimated 1,200 students this year, growing to 2,500 students during FY21.”

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