

LOCAL

Center casting a wider safety net

► A Richland Hills nonprofit is working to expand indigent mental health care.

By Alex Branch
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RICHLAND HILLS — The Muslim Community Center for Human Services is expanding its indigent mental health services to meet a growing need in Dallas-Fort Worth.

The nonprofit organization was founded during the mid-1990s in response to a growing refugee population but today serves all races and ethnicities. It has offered free medical services since 1998.

Dr. Basheer Ahmed, a psychiatrist and center founder, said he has performed some mental health treatment over the years with occasional help from volunteer psychiatrists.

But it is not enough, especially when social service agencies are tightening their belts because of government spending cuts.

"People call and have to wait a month to six weeks to get in for help," Ahmed said. "We could refer them somewhere else and they might have to wait two to three months for an appointment.

"When they can't find a place to go, they just tolerate their issues and never get in anywhere."

The center is recruiting more volunteer caseworkers and psychiatrists and recently linked its mental health services to a domestic violence program launched in 2006, said Talaun Thompson, the



Dr. Basheer Ahmed is the founder of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services.

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That year, the clinic got a federal grant to hire a social worker to train volunteers to help domestic violence victims. Officials also hope to hire a staff psychologist.

"We found that there was a large segment of women who are victims of domestic violence and appear depressed and anxious," Ahmed said. "Because of their cultural differences and language barriers, they didn't know where to go."

The center currently treats about 40 mental health patients, officials said,

Derrellynn Perryman, victim services coordinator for the Arlington Police Department, said the community center is usually the first place she calls when a Muslim family is involved in a domestic violence situation.

"There are some cultural sensitivity issues that are really important," she said.

"Within the Muslim community, there aren't many other options for these kinds of medical and mental services."

Ahmed stressed that although about 70 percent of the center's clients are immigrants, it welcomes all races and ethnicities.

The center gets almost three-quarters of its operating funds from private donors; the rest comes from government or foundation grants. The organization held its annual fundraiser Aug. 5.

To expand mental health services, organization officials hope to obtain more federal funding, Ahmed said.

In July, at a Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Service Administration meeting in Washington, Ahmed said he learned that organizations have a greater chance of receiving funding if they build a coalition with other social service providers.

The community center is reaching out to D-FW social service agencies, including women's shelters, to create a consortium for referrals and direct services, Ahmed said.

"We'd like to have a formal relationship with them," he said. "An understanding where we could refer a client who we do not have the services to handle to you — and you could send someone to us.

"I am hoping that a coalition like that would mean better care for everyone."

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