

DRUG-TREATMENT PROGRAM FACES MONEY CRUNCH LEXINGTON-BASED OPERATION CONSIDERS CLOSING, MOVING

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A local drug-treatment program might move out of Lexington unless it can raise about \$1 million.

"Basically, we're running out of money," said George Ross, executive director of Possibilities Unlimited.

Over the next four to six months, Possibilities Unlimited will complete the treatment of the 26 clients it has enrolled, Ross said yesterday. After that, the program's future is unknown.

Ross said the program needed about \$1 million to offset operating deficits, make capital improvements and create an endowment for long-term support.

Possibilities Unlimited is supported through private donations from individuals, corporations and foundations. It receives no direct government support.

Two factors caused the financial crunch, Ross said. Fewer clients are signing up, and two-thirds of those who do cannot afford to pay.

Possibilities Unlimited picks up the expenses of non-paying clients.

The problem has been growing for several years. But it became critical this spring when only five new clients signed up, compared with the 15 or 20 that would have been expected in a comparable period. Of the five, only two are paying their own way, Ross said.

Possibilities Unlimited charges a "full paying" client about \$15,000 for treatment. But Ross said that was a bargain compared with national averages for similar programs.

Unfortunately, declining client enrollment does not mean drugs are disappearing, Ross said. Instead, he said, it reflects the fact that teens are switching to a more socially acceptable drug -- alcohol.

Parents who would be alarmed by a teen's cocaine use are less likely to seek immediate treatment for a drinking problem, he said.

In the long term that will mean trouble for the teens, Ross said. But in the short term it is causing problems for Possibilities Unlimited.

"Client intakes have been declining for some time," said lawyer Lawrence Banks, a Possibilities Unlimited board member. "But what really is needed is a sufficient amount of funds to provide scholarships for those families that can't afford to pay."

Banks admitted that might be difficult because the economy was weak and many organizations were clamoring for funds.

Launched in 1983, Possibilities Unlimited is one of about 10 drug-treatment programs in Lexington. It seeks to treat drug abuse in teens by involving the entire family and it stressing discipline.

About 426 youths have completed the program.

However, Possibilities Unlimited stopped taking new clients last month because of the money crisis. Ten employees were laid off to cut costs.

Despite the cutbacks, Ross stressed that all 26 youngsters enrolled would be assured the full treatment regimen.

"Our first responsibility is to the kids in treatment now. I didn't want to be in the position of saying we're closing in five days and then just dumping the clients. That would have been morally and ethically reprehensible."

Ross said the Possibilities Unlimited board had made no firm decision on how to proceed. But there are several possibilities:

A drive to raise more money.

Moving the program to Louisville, where there would be a larger client base. However, people from Lexington still would be served.

Merging with some local non-profit hospital that could share operating costs.

Closing down temporarily until a solution is found.

"We need to see more commitment in patient referrals and more money. Basically, we're saying to the community, 'If you want the program, there's going to have to be a sustained effort to support it.' "

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