

LOCAL

With a goal to reach people of color, Polk County looks to hire 90 mental health counselors



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Polk County is launching a new program to bring to the area 90 mental health professionals to reach more people of color.

County supervisors are allocating almost \$2 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds toward the program, which looks to increase access to services, especially for communities of color, and address the shortage of mental health workers in the county, according to a news release.

Called the Mental Health Workforce Initiative, the program is seeking to help 90 new mental health therapists pay up to \$20,000 of their student loan payments. The therapists are required to work for five years at a community-based mental health provider in Polk County and have a master's degree and student loan debt, according to the release.

The county's efforts stem from a partnership with A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy, an organization with members from local faith congregations, neighborhood groups and nonprofits. Over the last few years, organization leaders have sought to address the lack of mental health workers after crisis mental health services for county children were delayed, the release said.

More: More people are homeless in Polk County than last year, new count shows

From there, AMOS held listening sessions for county residents and learned of their need "for more mental health workers with lived experiences and language skills to support racially and linguistically diverse" people, the release said.

“Our staff was filled with joy when we received news of these funds,” said Anne Starr, chief executive director of Orchard Place, a youth mental health provider in Des Moines. “This investment is going to save lives.”

The program is still seeking applicants. Those interested should contact Gaby Palacios, a program director at Project Iowa, via email gabypalacios@projectiowa.org or by phone at 515-280-1274.

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