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## CATHOLIC CHARITIES INCLUDED IN FEDERAL FUNDS FOR CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTHCARE

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When Burmese refugee Mu Paw arrived in the Des Moines area, there were no mental health therapists from her homeland working in central Iowa who could help her.

“It motivated me,” she said.

She just graduated from Grand View University with the aim of providing mental health services to her community.

As a recent intern with Catholic Charities, she said, “I was able to work with my community and support them with mental health therapy.”

The community needs more therapists like Paw.

Government funds are available to help recruit and retain mental health professionals to meet a need for more male therapists, therapists who are people of color and those who are bilingual.

In August, Catholic Charities will be added to the list of approved mental health providers whose staff can access the government funds through the American Rescue Plan Act, better known as ARPA. Catholic Charities has a long history of providing counseling services and serving the refugee and immigrant communities.

The funding and push to improve the community’s response to children’s mental health crises comes from communities of faith banding together through A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy, also known as AMOS, Polk County Supervisors and others.

They met May 18 to talk about how far they’ve come and the work that still needs to be done.

### **Children in crisis**

About six years ago, AMOS asked families what kept them up at night. Parents said they needed services for children in mental health crises.

“Kids were waiting months to see a therapist. They were not getting what they need from a system designed for adults,” said Crystal Loving, of First Unitarian Church. A child in the midst of a mental health crisis would be handcuffed, put in the backseat of a police car, and enter the juvenile justice system rather than get the mental health care that was needed.

Much has been accomplished. In Polk County, local organizing groups lobbied legislators and local officials. They were able to put together a plan that would get clinicians to respond to 9-1-1 calls for children in mental health crisis, get a stabilization center at Easter Seals, and have mobile crisis responders available to go to children in crisis. Parishioners of Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart Parish in Ankeny were among the community organizers with AMOS, saying their Catholic faith compelled them to seek help for the needy and vulnerable children.



## **More work to do**

In 2021, organizers realized the community needed male therapists, therapists of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, and multilingual therapists; they needed to recruit and incentivize retention.

For example, Orchard Place in Des Moines serves 7,000 children and families annually, 50 percent of them from communities of color. Yet only 20 percent of their staff are from communities of color, said Anne Starr, CEO of Orchard Place.

Of 350 employees, about 120 are like Derly Beacom, who would like to earn a master's degree and stay in the field but they don't have the money to pursue the degree.

"I hope to serve Latino families because I know how intimidating it can be" to seek help, said Beacom. "I want families to feel comfortable to see someone who looks like them and speaks their language."

## **Help coming**

Project Iowa connects job seekers to employers and vice versa.

"We will be providing loan repayments to 90 therapists in Polk County. These are people who are making sure we have representation among our therapists. We want to attract new talent coming out of school and also look to retain current therapists who are committed to serving local populations in Polk County," said Gaby Palacios.

Current therapists working at approved organizations and who are willing to commit to five years of working with those providers can get up to \$20,000 to help pay off student loans, she said.

## **Solidarity**

Looking out at the crowded room filled with people of varying faith traditions working together, Bishop William Joensen found hope in people searching for solutions for children and their families.

"Things are unfolding in a beautiful way through the solidary of spirit that we are able to form with one another," he said. Together the community can help service providers, "those who feel this call, this vocation from God that we as brothers and sisters in Christ and children of Abraham together can support."