

Clinic facing rising need to support children with autism

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Photo by Samantha Davis Behavior Analyst Clinical Lead for The Ready Clinic in Marshall Amy Sippl speaks at a meeting Tuesday about early intervention care for children with autism spectrum disorder, while showing information about families on a wait list seeking care.

MARSHALL — Continuing to see a dire need in the area for early intervention programs to support children diagnosed autism spectrum disorder, The Ready Clinic in Marshall is experiencing a wait-list of families looking for care. The clinic has seen developmental improvement among its clients, and is also seeking public support to continue its services over the region.

The Ready Clinic works with children from 18 months to 7 years old with autism in early intervention therapy and services to improve cognitive skills, before moving to their long-term school placement. The clinic is a part of Southwest West Central Service Cooperative (SWWC), and does not collect state or local tax dollars for its programs. Operating revenue is based from membership fees and grants.

In a public meeting held Tuesday morning, Marshall Ready Clinic staff gave updates about the work being provided, along with challenges they currently face.

“The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) just came out with updated rates of the occurrence of autism,” Clinical Director Amber Bruns said. “Right now, 1 in 31 kids are identified as having autism. In Minnesota specifically, we are now at 1 in 28.”

The Ready Clinic stands on Main Street in Marshall, while also having a clinic in Montevideo and Cosmos. Montevideo was the first clinic to open in 2019 with Cosmos following, and Marshall opened in May 2023.

“Without our work in The Ready Clinic, these services do not exist in our region,” Southwest West Central Service Cooperative Executive Director Cliff Carmody said. “(My job) while I work here, is to make sure that our school districts and that our children have access to the same programs that someone in a larger metropolitan area would have access to ... Oftentimes, I'll say the programs and services in Minneota should be the same as the programs and services in Minnetonka.”

All of The Ready Clinics are currently at full capacity, along with a wait-list.

“For our three clinics right now, there are 35 families that are waiting for these services,” Behavior Analyst Clinical Lead Amy Sippl said. “There are 24 families that are waiting for evaluations from us.”

Specifically, the Marshall clinic has 23 families on a wait-list as of April.

The clinic conducts evaluations at the beginning of the program, and frequently throughout, to measure development. They are also put on an Individualized Treatment Plan (ITP).

“The first day that kids come to The Ready Clinic, they receive an evaluation we call the LAP, Learning Accomplishment Profile,” Sippl said. “It’s an assessment of development that gives us an average developmental month, or a score, that tells us about how many skills does this child administer month over month, as compared to their same-aged peers. It looks at things like language, cognition, emotions, social emotional skills, gross motor skills, those types of things.”

Sippl said that children, on average, begin services at the clinic around 46 months of age, and said they are typically demonstrating skills of 17 month-year-olds on day one.

“Every six months the child is in our program, we measure the same assessment again. In the first six months that they’re with us on average ... That child has gained 7 1/2 months of development,” Sippl said. “That’s what this intervention is designed to do, to really accelerate their learning and start to gain those skills that are going to be most helpful to get them ready for their long-term educational placement.”

The clinic operates similar to a preschool, with various rooms, tools, toys and technology like Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices. AAC is a technology that allows children with autism to expand communication and social interaction, like working on a tablet to express dialogue for those who have limited verbal language.

“They (the kids) have to trust us, and (we’re showing) that we’re going to be an adult throughout their life that they can trust, so we get on the floor and we’ll play with them. We’re super engaged,” Melissa Andree, a behavioral analyst, said. “We take a lot of data to know if are our kids, what we call, happy, relaxed and engaged ... We really individualize that on how that looks for every child.”

The clinic operates Monday to Friday, and Sippl said children will spend anywhere from 20 to 40 hours a week there.

“It’s a commitment for families ... These kids are working harder than anybody,” Sippl said. “We are seeing tremendous progress.”

Both Bruns and Sippl spoke on the challenges the clinic is facing, including increased costs and staffing.

“We have already closed one in-person center (in Pipestone) due to our costs, and we do not want to continue to cut services because we aren’t able to financially make it work,” Bruns said. “If we are not providing this service, this service does not exist in this entire corner of the state, and I think it’s an incredible disservice to the kids who need it, and the families.”

“We are a first come, first serve provider. Regardless of a child’s insurance, we are not an in-network or out-of-network provider,” Sippl said. “We will figure out a way for your family to have services.”

Bruns also added that they often hear from families about the high expense of early prevention services, and noted that the current rates still don’t cover all of the clinic’s costs.

“We do everything that we can to make these services work for our families,” Bruns said. “If you know someone that might be interested in supporting us ... We would welcome you to come in and tour, and see what we’re doing with kids.”

Those seeking more information, looking to support, or seeking early prevention care for a child, can reach out to the clinic at readyintake@swwc.org.

“Early intervention is really, really important. Catching our kids early (with a diagnosis), and getting started with intervention and really important therapy, means our kids get

skills faster and sooner,” Bruns said. “It means we get them the skills they need, so they can be independent. They can play, they can be functional, they can do all of those skills that are important, and that brings a lot of value to their daily lives.”