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Part 2: Community Options rooted in humble beginnings

By Lisa Young Staff writer
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Clients from Community Options say 'thank you' to donors who gave to the organization during a recent Giving Tuesday and Colorado Gives Day. The donated funds were put into programs, supplies and upkeep of facilities.

Courtesy photo/ Community Options

Editor's note: This is the second in a three part series on Community Options, Inc., what the organization provides to its service communities, its history, its financial situation and what is being done to attempt to keep it running. To read part one, visit

deltacountyindependent.com If you have any information about the organization or have a story about how COI has impacted your life or the life of a family member, please send an email to editor@deltacountyindependent.com.

Not so long ago persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities were removed from their families and shutter away from society. Young children, teens and adults were placed in dark, unfriendly asylums.



The late 1800s to early 1900s saw the beginning of various institutions for "the feeble-minded." One such institution, the Colorado Insane Asylum in Pueblo established in 1879 later became the Colorado Mental Health Institute.

Thankfully, in the early 1960s change began to take place after decades of discrimination and fear began to give way to understanding and compassion.

In the late 1960s federal legislation deemed that persons with mental disabilities previously sent to institutions would be better served by creating local facilities near their homes.

As a result of the federal mandate, the Colorado General Assembly passed legislation in the early 1970s authorizing the establishment of Community Centered Boards.

Prior to that legislation, Robert Brown, of Delta, was invited to attend a presentation in 1967 by the newly minted Division of Mental Retardation. There he and several others learned how the new legislation could be implemented locally.

Over the next few months a group of dedicated Delta citizens began the Delta County Community Center for the Retarded, Inc. with the sole purpose of establishing a school for mentally challenged children.

As a result of their efforts, Sunshine School opened its doors in September 1967 with a dozen students and two retired school teachers from Olathe — Velma Barks and Anna Dunfee. The new school met in the Presbyterian Church of Delta in Westminster Hall and just like today's much larger Community Options funding for the fledgling school was a primary concern.

Families with children in the school paid \$5 per year for insurance. Their tuition was covered under Title 45 which channeled funds through state and local school districts. Much of the funding for the school came through in-kind and cash donations from the community.

During the same period, a group of individuals in Montrose under the Montrose County Mental Retardation Board Inc. began operating the Happiness School.

Delta's Sunshine School made a number of moves over the next decade eventually moving into the "old Calhoun House" on Garnet Mesa on Fourth Street. Today, Community Options provides services in an old Victorian house at 504 E. Fifth Street on Garnet Mesa.

Sunshine School continued to operate from 1972 to 1991 under the Uncompahgre Basin Mental Retardation Council, a consolidation of the Delta and Montrose Community Centered Boards which took place in 1972.

The newly formed UBMRC consisting of the two sister counties eventually morphed into the much larger Community Options, Inc., or COI, which now serves six Region 10 counties.

Community Options, one of 20 Community Centered Boards in Colorado, serves Delta, Montrose, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Ouray and San Miguel counties providing meaningful services to clients with intellectual and developmental disabilities including infants, children, adults and families.

While monumental progress has taken place since the days of Delta's Sunshine School and Montrose's Happiness School, today Community Options faces near extinction due to a regression in funding brought on in part by regulatory changes and increasing demands for services.

A comparison of several Western Slope Community Centered Boards reveals a concerning disparity among local community support for the various non-profits.

Community Connections in Durango receives between \$72,000 to \$99,000 per year from local county and city coffers. Mountain Valley Developmental Services in Glenwood Springs garnishes \$156,200 per year; Mesa Developmental Services/Strive in Grand Junction receives up to \$535,000 plus per year and Horizons in Steamboat Springs took in \$1 million in support from its local governmental entities.



As for Montrose-based Community Options, they trail their counterparts receiving roughly \$14,500 to \$19,500 per year in local county and city support.

Montrose County contributes between \$7,500 -\$12,500 per year; Delta County gives \$4,000; San Miguel County doles out \$2,000; Ouray gives \$1,000 while Gunnison and Hinsdale counties offer no direct financial support.

Recently Tom Turner, COI executive director, and Darcy Arnold, board president, made an impassioned plea to the Delta County Board of Commissioners asking for \$50,000 in emergency aid to “fill funding gaps and ward off another year of six-figure losses.” They also requested emergency funding from Montrose County where they were given an additional \$12,500, matching their budgeted amount.

Understanding that traditional approaches to funding no longer work in today's economy, Community Centered Boards across Colorado are scrambling to keep their doors open and provide services for needy clients with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In Community Options latest annual report, Turner summed up the present reality for the organization, “We finished the past two years with sizable budget deficits, and although we have decreased the size of that deficit this year, the trajectory is still unsustainable.”

In the wake of this stark reality, the non-profit remains actively involved in fund-raising activities to support their operations as they continue to work with the state to address Medicaid rate inadequacies and the loss of enrollments. In addition to addressing state level concerns, they've made a concentrated effort to engage local governmental entities for additional support.



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Perhaps, as in the days of the Sunshine and Happiness Schools, Community Options most important resource still lies in calling upon family members and community members to make the case that specialized services for 500 area citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities remains "too important to fail."

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