

September 25, 2024

Dear Commissioner William J. Novotny, III,

Thank you for your recent correspondence regarding your concerns about mental health services in Johnson County. Your commitment to improving service delivery is shared by VOA. I want to assure you that our Johnson County Clinic is open and serves a multitude of residents. Since July 1, 2024, or the last two and half months, VOA has provided care to 119 clients in Johnson County. To date, those 119 clients have had 743 service visits totaling close to 900 hours of clinical care. For comparison, between July 2023 and June 2024, our first year of the merger with Northern Wyoming Mental Health Center, we served 207 individuals in Johnson County. There are no records of previous service delivery by NWMHC, but I would speculate it was less service than what we are currently providing. These numbers clearly demonstrate our commitment to serving the needs of your community.

We are strategically working to meet the growing demand for mental health services across our regions and are particularly sensitive to the needs within Johnson County. The fact is that Wyoming is facing a healthcare provider crisis, represented by a shortage of experienced licensed clinicians nationally. VOA is uniquely positioned to share resources between our ten (10) clinics, four (4) residential addiction treatment centers, and two (2) Sub-acute crisis programs. For example, VOA has admitted five (5) Johnson County residents to residential addiction treatment and three (3) Johnson County residents to our new Sub-acute crisis program in Sheridan since July 1, 2024. As previously discussed with the commissioners, the Sub-acute crisis program is the first of its kind in Northern Wyoming and covers a critical gap in care.

We acknowledge the need for more access to care, which is a statewide issue, and we continue to work diligently to address the gaps through innovation and recruitment. Our concern is that many members of the Wyoming legislature have made calls for reduced funding for mental health services, further restricting access. Comments by legislators have indicated strong interest in redirected mental health services to the clergy, a group of leadership already overburdened within their churches, and ill-equipped to respond to mental health needs. Should this happen, it will have a devastating impact on care within our already stressed counties. We are making a significant effort to recruit local clinicians. Meanwhile, we are leveraging our wide network of clinics, as well as telehealth solutions, to ensure ongoing access to care, particularly as the community faces unprecedented challenges like the House Draw Fire.

While I understand there are concerns regarding our service delivery in Johnson County, I want to express my complete confidence that our programs, under the exceptional leadership of Dr. Aimee Foster, Chief Program Officer for VOA, are fully meeting the requirements of service outlined in your letter and our state contract with full support from the Wyoming Department of Health.

You referenced "Page 5 of Attachment A - Statement of Work, Section B, "requirements" Items 2 and 4." In this fiscal year alone, VOA has served clients in Johnson County through every listed category in your letter. Our service provision to the counties is dictated by our contract with the Wyoming

Department of Health. I want to affirm our commitment to the provision of exceptional mental health care, including access to housing supports, technology, and 24/7 telehealth crisis intervention. VOA is proud of its longstanding partnership with Johnson County, providing essential services for more than 20 years in youth services, adult supervision, drug court and Veterans services. Dr. Foster, along with our Vice President of Behavioral Health, and our Senior Director of Clinical Services, have been actively engaged with community stakeholders.

Your letter also mentioned the loss of SAMHSA funding. This was a onetime grant acquired by NWMHC during covid for Peer Specialist service delivery. When the grant ended, each of those staff was offered employment elsewhere in VOA. It is worth noting that the end of SAMHSA funding was not indicative of service deficiencies. In fact, we have continued to serve the clients of that grant and since July 1, 2024, we have served 33 individuals in Johnson County through peer support led groups and individual sessions.

SAMHSA has indicated that they will not be funding similar programs in the future because of other priorities. While this is disappointing for VOA, we will continue to look for grants and contract opportunities to complement our behavioral health services in the region, but at this time we have no reason to believe that the Peer Specialist Program will return as it once was.

Regarding your request for a meeting, I propose that Dr. Foster and I attend the October 15 County Commissioner meeting. We will look forward to a discussion on specific needs and gaps within Johnson County regarding mental health services. This meeting will be crucial as we explore how we can further normalize mental health services in challenging times and how our organization can play a pivotal role. If that date is unavailable, we welcome you to offer a date that fits your schedule, and we will make every effort to accommodate.

VOA is a leader of behavioral health services throughout Wyoming and is proud to serve Johnson County. Your invitation for further dialogue as an invested community partner is welcomed, and I believe it will contribute to our shared goals, especially as it relates to the state's platform of behavioral healthcare reform. I look forward to continuing our partnership and to discussing these important matters with you soon.

Sincerely,



Heath A. Steel

Executive Vice President - Chief Business Officer

VOA Northern Rockies

cc. The Honorable Governor Mark Gordon

Jeffrey M. Holsinger, VOA President & CEO

Dr. Aimee Foster, VOA Chief Program Officer

Jen Davis, Governor's Policy Advisor

Stefan Johansson, Director Wyoming Department of Health

Barry Crago, House Representative