



Guidance Center CEO Linda Cowen sits in front of one of the Guidance Center campus's new buildings. The Guidance Center celebrates 40 years of operation this year. (Josh Biggs/Arizona Daily Sun/Order this photo at <http://photos.azdailysun.com>)

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## 40 years on good behavior

By JOE FERGUSON  
Sun Staff Reporter  
Sunday, May 24, 2009

The Guidance Center started small in 1969 with a tiny little office in downtown Flagstaff, three employees and a budget of \$93,000.

At the time, the program focused on offering mental health programs for children at public schools.

Following the mission statement "to improve the behavioral health of the people of our community," the center has expanded its services over the last four decades to include outpatient services, acute psychiatric services, substance abuse programs and a detox services center at the center's Intake Triage Unit.

The ITU has 12 beds, and offers a variety of services meant to connect alcoholics to

other services in the city, in addition to detox.

Today, the Guidance Center has 234 employees and a \$21 million budget, serving roughly 2,400 clients in Flagstaff, Williams and the Supai village.

It celebrated its 40th anniversary in Flagstaff last week.

Management Information System Administrator Dagny Wallin has been with the Center for 24 years.

She is something of an anomaly, as most employees spend a few years with the nonprofit before leaving for jobs in other cities, said Linda Cowen, the CEO of The Guidance Center.

She said the nonprofit has become a training center for mental health professionals, coming to the Center for their first job out of college.

But they often leave after a few years for different communities that can afford to pay better, or just have a lower cost of living when compared to Flagstaff, she said.

"Many are relocating. They love the area but can't afford to stay," Cowen said.

Wallin said she finds the job rewarding, working to help people.

"I love this place, it doesn't feel like work," Wallin said.

Cowen said the decision to add programs and services over the years has generally been made for one of two reasons.

"Our decisions are driven by community need or some type of state-issued mandate," she said.

#### FROM IDEA TO REALITY

The establishment of the Intake Triage Unit illustrates the lengthy process of transforming an identified community need into a viable program.

"It was tossed around for a long time -- who was going to fund it, who was going to run it," Cowen said.

She said the state stepped in several years ago, mandating the creation of detox centers in rural areas.

In the first year of operation, Cowen said the program has helped about 1,000 individuals.

But she isn't measuring the program's success on how many are served. She said the ITU's underlying mission is helping alcoholics and addicts lead a more productive life.

"We said if we could change one that would be worth it," she said.

But for Flagstaff Medical Center, every patient treated at the ITU means one less

person recovering in the emergency department.

Hospital spokeswoman Starla Addair-Collins said the average charge for one visit by a habitual intoxicant is between \$1,000 to \$1,500.

One frequent visitor, said Addair-Collins, has amassed a half-million-dollar bill with the hospital. She said the person has secondary medical issues that complicate his frequent visits to the ED.

#### NEW PHARMACY

Roughly 80 percent of the Center's budget comes from federal funding, although the rest of the funding mostly comes from the state of Arizona.

Cowen said she is expecting a 7 percent cut in her funding from the state.

She hopes the introduction of co-pays will help bridge the gap for some services, but expects some will not be able to afford the services.

"It will mean that some individuals that are receiving services will not be able to afford it," she said.

She said emergency services will be unaffected by the cuts.

"There will always be emergency care," she said.

In the last few years, the Center established a pharmacy in an attempt to diversify its income streams.

"Hopefully that will help offset some of the revenue loss," she said.

She is also looking forward to a new partnership with North Country HealthCare that will establish a clinic in the Center's campus on Vickey Street.

Joe Ferguson can be reached at [jferguson@azdailysun.com](mailto:jferguson@azdailysun.com) or 556-2253.

By the numbers

The Guidance Center

2187 Vickey St.

Flagstaff

527-1899

\$21 million annual budget

234 employees

2,400 clients/yr

1,000 detox/ITU clients/yr

