

[http://www.sharonherald.com/news/local\\_news/psychiatric-rehab-program-gets-new-kitchen/article\\_37d580b2-8320-11e8-927b-5bc4f5bb8b2a.html](http://www.sharonherald.com/news/local_news/psychiatric-rehab-program-gets-new-kitchen/article_37d580b2-8320-11e8-927b-5bc4f5bb8b2a.html)

TOPICAL

ALERT

FEATURED

## Psychiatric rehab program gets new kitchen

By DAVID L. DYE Herald Staff Writer Jul 9, 2018



Justin Disko, who oversees the cooking program at the Community Counseling Center of Mercer County in Hermitage, displays the new kitchen, which was officially opened on June 28.

DAVID DYE | Herald

HERMITAGE — When it comes to helping people with serious mental illness, Community Outreach and Development Director Fern Torok said there are some factors that can be modified and some that can't.

Some things can't be controlled, such as a family history of cancer, but others, like teaching clients how to budget or provide healthier foods for themselves, can be taught at the Community Counseling Center of Mercer County in Hermitage.

"Sometimes it might be younger clients who are just moving out on their own and never had to cook for themselves before, and other times it might be someone who wants to take better care of themselves," Torok said.

The counseling center added a kitchen to use for teaching people to cook meals safely. The addition was funded with assistance from the community development block grants of Hermitage and Mercer County, with the official ribbon-cutting ceremony held on June 28, Torok said.

But Psychiatric Rehabilitation Supervisor Nicole Sims said when she started in 2009, the cooking class focused on how clients could budget their food purchases, before expanding into kitchen safety and eventually food preparation.

"When it first started, we used a regular group meeting room. We didn't even use a kitchen," Sims said.

For a few years, the program used the kitchen in what was also the employee lounge as well as a room for group meetings. That meant schedules could clash or programs risked interrupting the others. By having a new kitchen, Sims said clients in the program are able to have their own space while learning skills that can benefit them not just at home but potentially in their careers as well.



Fern Torok, community outreach and development director at the Community Counseling Center of Mercer County in Hermitage, shows off some of the produce which was planted and maintained entirely by clients in the Psychiatric Rehabilitation program.

DAVID DYE | Herald

“The nice thing is we may have a client go through the program and decide they liked cooking, and then go on to get a job in a kitchen in a restaurant,” Sims said. “So sometimes we might help someone find a passion that they didn’t know they had.”

Aside from learning how to cook certain meals, Justin Disko, the psychiatric rehabilitation specialist who oversees the cooking classes, said the clients also learn skills such as cleaning up the kitchen after they’re completed or the difference between a cooking pot and a sauté pan. Of course, Disko said the clients’ favorite part is always getting to enjoy what they made in class.

“Eating what they make at the end is always the best part, but it’s not just simple things either, because we’ll make things such as sauces, or homemade bread,” Disko said. “We also do homemade pizza and everybody loves that, especially when they see all the different ingredients come together

into a pizza.”

Other classes besides cooking are able to use the kitchen, too. Some classes might teach how to make bath bombs or soaps, while other classes could teach clients certain teas that can be used to help deal with stress, Disko said.

Projects in the kitchen can even incorporate produce developed in the small garden on the property. Planted and maintained entirely by the clients under Disko’s direction, the garden produces vegetables from cherry tomatoes to cucumbers to corn.

And like the kitchen, the garden allows the clients to see the fruits of their labor even as they’re learning, Disko said.

“Patience is a big thing, because everybody wants instant gratification. But with gardening, that’s not really possible,” Disko said.

*Like David L. Dye on Facebook or email him at [ddye@sharonherald.com](mailto:ddye@sharonherald.com).*

**1 comment**

**Sign in**

**1 person listening**