

Minnesota seeks to replace retiring agricultural mental health counselor

BY MICHAEL JOHNSON
Agweek

Minnesota funds the cost of two counselors who provide mental health counseling to the agriculture community across the entire state, free of charge.

Region 5 Development Commission executive director Cheryal Hills describes the two rural mental health counselors as gems who “bleed rural.”

Those tasked with being available to those in the agriculture community going through times of crisis seven days a week include Ted Matthews, who has worked in rural counseling for over 45 years, and Monica McConkey, who has worked in the mental health sector for 25 years.

These two currently provide counseling services to farm individuals, couples and families anywhere in the state, either in person, via Zoom or over the phone. Their services are free and confidential.

But at the end of June, Matthews is set to retire. Region 5 Development Commission is seeking a new mental health specialist in the state to fill Matthews’ shoes.

Hills is hopeful for even more help for those feeling stressed on the farm.

“The hope is that we’ll be able to fund a third person,” Hills said.

Funding for that third person needs to be included in the state’s budget in order for it to happen. Hills feels that there are factors at play keeping that from happening in the current session, which is set to end on May 19. One is that the state is facing a projected deficit in the coming years. This has caused some tightening of belts in the budget process. However, Hills said a



Don Davis / Forum News Service file photo

Mental health specialist Ted Matthews testifies about farmer mental health in front of a Minnesota House committee in 2018.

downturn in the farm economy makes it all the more timely to give farmers all the help they can get.

Minnesota Department of Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen agrees that farm stress is prevalent, as it often is in times of low commodity prices.

“They are busy,” Petersen said of the counselors and a group of 12 advocates who can assist farmers in getting help they need quickly. “We can see mediations are up, over 100 mediations in 2025. You know, we can see crop prices. Thank goodness for beef prices, you know, but those folks in the crop side, things are kinda tough.”

From conversations he’s had, he feels that two counselors, along with the 12 farm advocates in the state, deserve continued funding, but that



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Monica McConkey talks about her role in rural mental health in October 2023 in Fergus Falls, Minnesota.

they are able to handle the current demands.

Petersen gets calls from farmers, advocates and the counselors to stay up to date on what’s happening in the state. He’s happy to take the call from farmers in need, and he encourages them to reach out to an

advocate to help them get help quickly. He reminds the ag community that there really is help available.

“I notice that people, sometimes, you have to ask them two or three times,” Petersen said. He recently had several phone calls from a farmer

who was facing financial difficulties. After several attempts, Petersen talked him into calling an advocate who quickly helped resolve a financial issue that was keeping the farmer under tremendous stress when he needed to plant the crop.

“He said, ‘What a relief that was taken off my hands,’” Petersen recalled.

From the political side of things, Hills said some legislators believe that having President Donald Trump in office means that the economy is going to improve and the agriculture industry will reap the rewards.

“Some folks have a lot of optimism as to how things will shift,” Hills said. “Some do not.”

Hills said conversations around the issue of adding another specialist revolve around the abundance of uncertainty. Tariffs, trade implications and lower crop prices are all bringing stress. Hills said an often-brought-up subject is that if necessary, there will be a bailout for farmers.

“Even if a bailout comes through, uncertainty remains,” Hills said. She said the actions seen so far do not offer much assurance to farmers that a bailout will come through.

“The confidence rating of this administration to help farmers is at an all-time low,” Hills said.

Politics aside, Hills said the mental health offerings have seen a dramatic increase in demand in the state.

“When things in the economy are impacted, that creates stress and additional requests for service,” Hills said.

The commission is accepting requests for proposals from mental health providers through May 10. Hills said they are looking for someone

who has experience with agriculture or knowledge of the industry. Having experience dealing with the stressors of farming has helped the current counselors come from a place of understanding with their clients.

Find out more about the request at <https://www.regionfive.org/rfp>.

Get help

The Minnesota Farm and Rural Helpline is open to anyone who is struggling with stress, anxiety, or depression. Calls are answered 24/7 by trained counselors who can lend a listening ear or connect you with help for business, financial, or legal problems. Call 833-600-2670 or text “FARMSTRESS” to 898211 to get started.

If you or someone you know is dealing with a crisis caused by either a natural disaster or financial problems, contact one of the MDA’s nine Farm Advocates. They know all about agricultural lending practices, mediation, lender negotiation, farm programs, crisis counseling, disaster programs, and to recognize the need for legal and/or social services.

Ted Matthews and Monica McConkey, offer confidential counseling services at no cost to farm individuals, couples, or families anywhere in the state. Sessions can take place in person, on Zoom, or over the phone, and insurance is not needed. They have helped hundreds of Minnesota farmers and farm family members over the years.

To learn more about all of the state resources that are available to help in times of stress, visit www.minnesotafarmstress.com, or contact the Minnesota Farm and Rural Helpline at 833-600-2670 or by texting “FARMSTRESS” to 898211.