

Benson-Based Mental-Health Group Wants Out of Tucson Partnership

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Adam Yepiz, a crisis specialist, takes a call at the Crisis Response Center, which is run by the Community Partnership of Southern Arizona. The partnership is being threatened with dissolution in a lawsuit by Southeastern Arizona Behavioral Health Services.

A Benson-based mental-health network is threatening to tear down a key Tucson community institution that it helped build 16 years ago.

Southeastern Arizona Behavioral Health Services Inc. is asking a Pima County Superior Court judge to dissolve the Tucson-based Community Partnership of Southern Arizona.

The community partnership oversees the treatment of people with serious mental illness or substance-abuse problems in Pima County, funneling tax money to clinics and monitoring their performance. The partnership also operates the new Crisis Response Center on East Ajo Way, part of a \$57 million behavioral-health complex.

At an Aug. 22 hearing, Judge Jan Kearney called the lawsuit a "matter of significant community interest" that should be handled "with all feasible speed."

SEABHS (pronounced "see-bus"), as the Benson-based network is known, alleges in its lawsuit that the community partnership has gone on a reckless spending spree, paying exorbitant salaries and spending excessively on travel and community grants.

"Hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayers' money was given away by CPSA in FY 2009 and FY 2010 for sponsorships and gifts to other organizations," the lawsuit alleges. It goes on to say the partnership has tried to "rob" SEABHS of its \$20 million share in the community

partnership.

But the lawsuit also coincides with a period of serious financial decline for SEABHS and comes with this offer: We'll settle the case and leave the community partnership intact if it pays us \$20 million.

That stuck out to Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy in Washington, D.C., when asked to review the case.

"Everything in there is designed to create leverage for some sort of settlement, so they (SEABHS) can get the money and part ways," Dorfman said.

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