



## North Alabama Mental Health Coalition

March 12, 2024

### Attendees (in person):

Daniel Adamek (Little Orange Fish)  
Jennifer Blazer (ALSP)  
Selena Carter (Huntsville Hospital)  
La'trisha Fletcher (DHR)  
Kelly Goff (ADMH)  
Kim Holder (Not One More Alabama)  
Stephanie Jennings (Best Life Recovery)  
Michael Mathis  
Connie Oakley (GRAMI)  
Cheryl Russell (Drug Free Partnership)  
Tarak Vasavada (Huntsville Hospital/UAB)  
Mack Yates - Work (SVDP/VOP)

Kenny Anderson (City of Huntsville)  
Annie Brasseale (VOP)  
Emily Colbert (Wellstone)  
Jennifer Geist (First Stop)  
Traci Harris (Elm Foundation)  
Daelyn Houser (Wellstone)  
Sammie Laster (GRAMI)  
Cheryl McClendon (Wellstone/WES)  
Karen Petersen (Wellstone)  
Dustin Spires (Madison Fire)  
Lakebra Walker (Alliance Health)

Kelli Arthur (VA)  
Darlene Burton (Salvation Army)  
Akeem Davis (Huntsville Hospital)  
Kelli Glass (Wellstone)  
Chaniece Hicks (First Stop)  
Kim Houser (Not One More Alabama)  
Tammy Leeth (Probate Judge's Office)  
Tealacy Mitchell (Thrive Alabama)  
Mark Prescott (NAMI)  
Paula Steele (Wellstone/WES)  
Don Webster (HEMSI)

### Welcome and Introductions

Introductions are important because you need to find out who can help you and who you can help.

### Community of Hope – Mandy Kilgore

Mandy Kilgore is the founder of *Community of Hope*, which is working on building a residence community for the chronically homeless in Madison County. She handed out flyers about the master plan and a flyer that focused on the story of a certain chronically homeless individual. They are trying to break down stereotypical views of homeless population. They are working on replicating a model community located in Austin, Texas called Community First Village. Mandy traveled with John Meredith to visit the Austin community and to meet with the city council there. They were able to observe the community in action and realized that there is really no security threat.

Community of Hope is looking for 50 acres and fundraising. Most of the available grants are for programs and not for buildings. Zoning and coding restrictions within the City of Huntsville are challenging, so they are looking for land in Madison County. They will have public transport to take community members to and from their jobs in Huntsville (Austin does this).

They are planning to build 150 homes: 128 for the chronically homeless and the remainder will be for missionaries (friends, mentors, guides).

They are hoping to have mental and physical health resources onsite, as well as addiction services. It will be a working farm, so there will be workforce development on site. They will have chickens and a 2–3-acre garden, so that the members of the community can have farm work experience. They will also have an onsite farmer's market.

Chapman and Sisson architects donated their services to design a master plan which you can view on their website (you can do 3D walk-through).

She asked the coalition to help raise awareness and help people to realize that there would be no safety concern.

Someone asked where they are in their capital campaign. Mandy emphasized that they want to purchase land and have already raised \$950,000; however, the cost of land continues to rise. They are looking for investors. They are building a quality master planned community that everyone would be proud of (less expensive than the skybridge).

A question was raised about whether it will be a transitional community. Mandy said it will be permanent supportive housing, but some people will transition out when they are finally healed.

After housing becomes full, someone asked if the homeless could reside there in tents. She does not want to house people in tents. Austin began with 50 acres and have since grown to 154 acres, and they are continuing to expand. After the community in Austin proved successful, Travis County finally financed them.

The members of the community will pay rent; rent is mandatory. They will have onsite workforce development to help them pay rent (they can work on the farm).

What are the criteria for living in the community? You have to have verifiable proof that you have been in Madison County for at least a year. This community is for the chronically homeless.

They encourage the community to come in and visit, so there will be a local Airbnb. Revenue from the Airbnb rental will feed back into the community. They will not be the experts on anything; they will rely on the community to provide expertise.

The application process will use agencies that already serve the homeless.

They have approached Madison County commissioners.

A question was asked about doing the project incrementally. Mandy said it could be done, but it doesn't work as well. They want all of the services to be in the same area.

Don Webster brought up the fact that if you build a community like this, it would save money on the services that the City of Huntsville is already providing to the homeless. It would be good to determine how much money Austin saved as the community came into full operation in Texas.

What can community partners do to support the effort? They have a "Pieces of the Solution" campaign where you can pledge support for acres of land. They also want help raising awareness within the community and about their goals – to provide permanent supportive housing. The homeless population is growing, and this community will help everyone in Madison County. They will not end homelessness, but it is a step in the right direction.

Mack said that the long-term issue of where to send the homeless needs to be tackled and this is a good step.

Mandy reiterated that you have to be a verifiable chronically homeless person in Madison County for at least a year in order to become part of the community.

### **Not One More Alabama – Kim Holder, Board of Directors Substance Abuse**

Kim talked about the start of *Not One More Alabama*. It started when friends with children in treatment programs found there were no support systems or resources for them. In 2016, a group of family members and professionals collaborated and investigated the impact of addiction on the community in Alabama. Addiction is a disease and should be treated as such and not stigmatized with language or actions. The mission of the organization is to help and support those with addiction and their families. They also educate the community about substance use disorder. They try to inspire young people to stay drug free. They try to fill gaps where the city and schools don't meet the needs of those with addiction. They work with other organizations in the state to bring statewide educational events to our area. Kim had a flyer with a list of events and has the numbers of connections in social media.

One of their annual programs is Overdose Awareness Day. They place flags at the corner of Meridian St. and Pratt Ave. to represent deaths that have occurred as a result of overdose. The number of flags has increased from year to year.

They sponsor an annual End Addiction Huntsville walk and have resources for recovery and support there. They are trying to reduce the stigma of addiction and substance abuse disorder. They distribute Narcan at these events.

They also sponsor a family support group (similar to AlAnon) which meets weekly on Baily Cove. They are trying to expand this program.

Other programs include a new event called Recovery at the River (Ditto Landing), which is a grief workshop (sometime in October), and they even sponsor a softball team (the Sober Sluggers).

Every year they place trees on Tinsel Trail in Huntsville. The Angel Tree has names of over 100 people that were lost to accidental overdose. They added a Tree of Hope this year and included 115 people in recovery. Kim had a flyer including information about their programs.

She had another flyer that provides simple lists of education support resources and ways that you can help. She is in long term addiction recovery herself and is also a parent coach. They are not a referral agency, but provide support and list support agencies on their website (<https://www.notonemorealabama.org/>).

Addiction doesn't discriminate, but treatment does. Many people cannot afford the treatment and they can refer people to treatment options.

**Tarak Vasavada, MD Medical Director Huntsville Hospital Behavioral Science and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at UAB Heersink School of Medicine**

Dr. Vasavada has been in Huntsville for 30 years. The Huntsville Hospital Behavioral Health unit has 35 beds (including 12 geriatric beds and 23 others). The unit typically has 10-12 patients waiting in the ER for an open bed every day. The ER is not intended for mental health patients. They have 3 full time psychiatrists and are in the process of recruiting 2 more. It is challenging to recruit psychiatrists because they rarely want to work in a hospital setting. The hospital is willing to pay them a good salary. The average patient load is 45-55 (in ER, on the floor, and in the consult). Even though a patient may be located in the ER in Huntsville Hospital, he/ she may have to be transported elsewhere when beds are unavailable in the Behavioral Health unit. Huntsville Hospital is the only place where you can get ECT in North Alabama. He is trying to set up a bridge clinic where patients can go and be seen more quickly if they were recently released from the hospital. In the past 6 months a social worker has been added to the ER, which has helped a lot. They are also taking people to Creekside. Even though they don't want people to have to travel far away, they are currently waiting an average of 5 days in the ER. They also work closely with ROSS and Bradford (50% of patients have substance abuse issues).

They are also trying to work on a new commitment process with the probate judge. They don't want to commit people until they have recovered from their substance abuse issues. They try to find avenues for help for substance abuse.

There is a need for pediatric psychiatry so Dr Vasavada was glad to meet Dr. Ed Finn who will be the new director for the new pediatric unit at Wellstone Emergency Services. Currently they have a contract with UAB to help in the pediatric ER and on the pediatric floor, but they have lost their nurse practitioner so he is glad the pediatric unit is opening at Wellstone. There is a bridge clinic at UAB to see the pediatric patients once they have been discharged from the hospital.

Mack asked if the hospital has any plans to expand the number of beds in the psychiatric unit. Dr. Vasavada said they don't have the psychiatrists to expand the unit. The hospital has given them a temporary unit in the ER (currently there are 8 to 10 people in the unit waiting to go upstairs).

They were hoping that Wellstone would take some of the patient load, but they are busy, too.

Dr. Vasavada's hope is to have a medical/psychiatric unit. People are sometimes waiting in the hospital for 90 days to be placed somewhere – and this is not all psychiatric patients. He is not sure the hospital has the room for such a unit.

He is hoping to hire 2 more psychiatrists and he could hire them today if they were available. Huntsville Hospital pays a good amount of money, but the psychiatrists are getting burned out. On weekend call he sometimes sees up to 55 patients and, even though they get help from UAB, it is hard work.

They are working with Dr. Martin on the psychiatric residency program and they are very encouraged about it. The residents will be doing some of the work, but the doctors will also have to spend some of their time teaching the residents.

Dr. Vasavada's wish list is to have everything in one building. It would have a clinic on the top floor, the first floor would be an ER, and the middle floor would be used as an inpatient setting.

A lot of the new psychiatrists are just seeing their patients from home, so it is very tempting to just do that work. Getting a license from other states is easier now than it used to be.

Dr. Vasavada said his staff and all the nurses work very hard.

Don Webster mentioned that it is very labor intensive in the ER. It practically takes one nurse per mental health patient.

The waiting time in the ER is big concern of Huntsville Hospital board. Sometimes there are 25 stretchers in the ER waiting for rooms to open up.

There is a lot of money spent in the ER on watching mental health patients before they go to the psych unit (approximately \$2.5 million to watch these people in ER per month). This represents 275 – 300 people in the ER per month that the psychiatrists see. Dr. Vasavada is on call 4-5 days per month plus the weekend calls.

Mack asked what is the top of list that Dr. Vasavada would like to see. He said that Huntsville needs child psychiatric care so that you don't have to go out of town. The Mental Health unit needs to be better. It was built a while ago and it would now cost a lot of money to improve it (\$1 million plus to renovate).

### **HEMSI Update – Don Webster**

HEMSI is now owned by Huntsville Hospital along with six other ambulance services in North Alabama. When Huntsville Hospital acquired other hospitals (Marshall County, Athens/Limestone, etc.), they got into the ambulance service. They created an Emergency Services, LLC owned by Huntsville Hospital. This created a strong coalition of ambulance services across North Alabama. They can all pool their resources in time of emergencies (such as a tornado). Together, they now have better buying power. The continuity of patient care and training of their people will be consistent. They are a very large organization and average about 237 calls every 24 hours. A lot of these calls represent mental health cases. They are still averaging 2.7 opioid overdoses per day (the number rose this year from 2.3).

The ambulances are still yellow and blue. They will continue to work with first responders. This move is better for employees (better money and benefits). They are now training their own EMTs.

Things are getting better, especially with the new child care facility that is coming to Wellstone.

### **Open Floor**

GRAMI is about to publish a magazine and will be offering free advertising for all of the resources here. Please contact them with your organization's details and logo. The deadline is at the end of the month.

Their website is: <https://gramius.org/>

Mike Mathis mentioned that Psi Kappa Kappa (chapter of Omega Psi Phi fraternity) organization is hosting a mental health 5K race on May 18<sup>th</sup> at Big Spring Park (carnival themed). May is Mental Health Awareness month. A mental health fair will be held in the park after the race in order to bring mental health resources to the community. This is an opportunity to get your organization's information out to the public at no cost to stake holders. Their goal is to have 20 – 30 organizations present to hand out information about mental health. They are also working with the A&M and UAH psych departments.

See their website for more information.

*Next Meeting  
Tuesday April 9, 2024  
11:00 am at Wellstone*