



North Alabama Mental Health Coalition April 9, 2024

Attendees (in person):

Daniel Adamek (Little Orange Fish)
Chief David Bailey (Madison Fire)
Crystal Bone (Fox Army Health)
Rudolfo Chavez (SVDP)
Ed Finn (WES/Wellstone)
Traci Harris (Elm Foundation)
Stephanie Jennings (Best Life Recovery)
Tammy Leeth (Probate Judge's Office)
Krista Moulton (Therapist / NAMI)
Roman Peppers (Community of Hope)
Jakob Shilt (VA Police)
Joycelyn Ward (ALSP)

Jessica Alford (First Stop)
Kim Bigelow (Warrior Wellness Program)
Annie Brasseale (VOP)
Emily Colbert (Wellstone)
Chief Johnny Gandy (Madison Police)
Jeff Hastings (Ross)
Kati Lang (Amedisys Home Health)
Cheryl McClendon (Wellstone/WES)
Connie Oakley (GRAMI)
Karen Petersen (Wellstone)
Randall Stanley (NACH)
Don Webster (HEMSI)

Kenny Anderson (City of Huntsville)
Jennifer Blazer (ALSP)
Melissa Caldwell (Wellstone)
Woodie Deleuil (NAMI)
Kelli Glass (Wellstone)
Kim Holder (Not One More Alabama)
Sammie Laster (GRAMI)
Cathy Miller (United Way)
Christina Pannell (Therapist)
Cheryl Russell (Drug Free Partnership)
Paula Steele (Wellstone/WES)
Mack Yates - Work (SVDP/VOP)

Welcome and Introductions

Introductions are important because you need to find out who to help you

Probate Court Update – Judge Frank Barger, Probate Judge

Tammy Leeth, Director of Mental Health - Probate

Judge Barger took office in January 2019 took office and mental health is very important to him. The rate of commitments was 300 per year then and the number has grown to 700 petitions in 2023. This year they will have more than doubled the number of mental health people that they are seeing. Judge Barger feels like this is due to the growth in Madison County as well as to the fact that we have more services than many other parts of the state. His goal when he took office was to streamline the commitment process and provide relief as quickly as possible. They now have a mental health docket every day in the court. They have a standing order in effect where they can make a recommendation in as little as 3 days. The hospital likes it to take longer so that they can get folks stabilized as quickly as possible.

They try to use the resources that are given to them wisely. The County Commission supports mental health and this is the fifth year that the county gave them the money they requested for court operations. They balance their money to the penny.

The idea of using resources well means following the parameters of the law. They make sure that the people that actually need commitments are the ones that get it.

Judge Barger saw recidivation at an extremely high rate. They were stabilizing folks well, but there were no follow-up procedures in place. They started an Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) program in 2019 with the assistance of Wellstone. They are able to monitor those under the AOT with a case manager program and are able to make sure that they get to doctor's and therapist's appointments, help them with basic needs and setting goals. They envelop them with a continuum of care. They have sent 200 folks through the AOT program and there has been less than 20% recidivism among those that they have helped in AOT. They are funding the program through passport fees. For every \$35 fee collect for passports, 100% of the fee is funneled into the mental health court programs. Last calendar year, those fees amounted to ¼ of a million dollars going to the court program which helped pay for the case management staff and other court costs. With Wellstone's help, the AOT program received a \$1 million grant in 2021 (and for the next 3 years).

They no longer have to use passport fees to fund the AOT program, so they have been able to use the money to hire Tammy Leeth to manage the mental health court (and she will be getting an assistant).

A key component of the AOT program is the intake process. They now require the family (or the police or hospital) to come to the court to ensure that the person needs this program. They only accept a person into the system if they fit the criteria. If they don't fit the criteria for commitment, they will still work with them to try and obtain the resources that they need for the long term.

In May they will launch an “arts in mental health” program. All those involved in AOT will be able to participate. Artist Sarah Clemmons will be the artist in residence. This fall they will have an art show with the works from those in the AOT program.

A lot of good work is being done at the State level in mental health and Judge Barger complimented the State Director of Mental Health. He also praised the work of the Wellstone and the Emergency Services operation. He is looking forward to the opening of the Children’s Emergency Services so we can treat our children and adolescents here in our community.

Sarah Stewart will be starting next year as a new Chief Justice and under her direction, they had the first statewide judicial mental health summit last year. They looked at how the courts can better coordinate with each other for better mental health care. Judge Barger has been asked to help coordinate the efforts of the court system and educating them on what has worked in Madison County’s Probate Court.

Mack brought up that the one of the big problems is the lack of long-term care. He mentioned that California has more long-term facilities, but Alabama laws are better regarding the criteria for getting into long-term care. He asked about getting help for long-term care. The Judge responded that we still don’t have the funding that we did 30 years ago. There are legislators that are concerned with mental health, but until we have more funding...the situation won’t change.

Judge Barger praised the CIT program mentioning that they could not do the work the way that they do now without it.

Someone asked what is the source of the majority of the petitions for commitment. Judge Barger said it is usually law enforcement or a direct service provider like the hospital.

Mack brought up the idea of funding the jails to supply psychiatric help since that is where the majority of the interaction with mental health issues takes place. Judge Barger mentioned that taking on that kind of care is a liability and would be extremely expensive in the jail system.

Someone asked if those currently in the AOT program are in therapy and just unstable. Judge Barger explained that there are some of the participants in the AOT program that don’t have basic needs met (like homeless), but most of who they deal with are those who have alienated their complete support system. They are seeing fewer and fewer people that are completely homeless.

The only access to involuntary treatment is through the court. It has to go through the Probate Judge’s office. The best thing a family member can do is to reach out to the court (i.e., contact Tammy Leeth). If they go to the hospital or the police, they will reach out to the Probate Office anyway.

A few years ago, a bill (HB70) was passed that allows the court within 30 days to convert someone involuntarily committed to AOT services and be able to monitor them.

Someone asked the Judge about his opinion of the current laws on adolescent consent. Judge Barger mentioned that the Probate Court has no jurisdiction over adolescents; however, he feels that the age of consent should be much higher (16 or more). He is looking forward to some progress being made on the way the courts interact with each other on cases. Currently they are not supposed to call other judges about cases, but they are trying to change that.

He mentioned that it would help if Decatur West would open more beds for adolescents.

If you need to get in touch with the Probate Judge, call **(256)532-3330** and ask for **Tammy Leeth**. They are on call 24 hours a day.

Community Development Planner – Joyce Davis

Joy’s job with the City of Huntsville is to manage grant funds to organizations serving the low-income population, but she also works on issues dealing with the unsheltered in the community.

Officer Savage has been working the past 14 months with Joy in helping the unsheltered homeless population.

They realized the whole community needs to work together in a collaborative effort to address these problems, so they developed The City of Huntsville Homeless Outreach Initiative. The program is administered by Community Development and Huntsville Police Department. They received approval from city leaders.

They have started with a steering committee which consists of: Community Development, law enforcement, First Stop, ROSS, and Wellstone. The steering committee meets every month and is currently working on a memorandum of understanding on how they work together and hold each other accountable.

They go out every week to meet with homeless. The Initiative deals with just the unsheltered homeless (people who don't have four walls).

Officer Savage reminded everyone that this is a community issue and their strength is in the partnership of the organizations in the Initiative. Officer Savage is mainly there for security. He is encouraged by the work that is being done by the members of the Initiative.

The committee meets with homeless people and brings services to them. Time is a major factor in dealing with the homeless, so the case managers can set up appointments the next day. They provide immediate action and are able to follow through with the homeless and hold them accountable.

Mack reiterated that there is a window of opportunity in dealing with someone with mental health issues and if you lose it, you may not get it again.

Joy is encouraged that the Initiative is making sure everyone is communicating and they are working together on identifying barriers and overcoming them. It is very difficult to find affordable housing and Community Development is working on a Home Grant to develop affordable housing.

They also work with Judge Cleveland to make sure that they are all on the same page.

Part of Joy's role is data collection and education. They conducted the official count for HUD in the last days of January. Their preliminary numbers are slightly lower than last year.

There are 247 unsheltered in a tri-county area (including Madison, Morgan, and Limestone counties). The sheltered count (transitional housing, emergency shelters, etc.) is 381. The total number is 628. This information can be found on the city's website as well as on the NACH website.

They are very satisfied with these numbers, especially since the methodology they use to collect the numbers is improving. The work that the Initiative is doing is having an effect and the data shows that.

A question was asked about how many of the 628 are juveniles. There are no unsheltered juveniles and less than 20% of the sheltered are juveniles. If they run into juveniles, then DHR gets involved. Harris Home is considered in their count, but children in foster care are not counted.

The Emergency Solutions grant for program year 2023 will be going to the City Council this Thursday. This grant money only goes to those organizations that serve the homeless.

A question was asked about the duration of homelessness. Joy said most of the unsheltered homeless are chronic. The strength of the Initiative is that they know the individuals and can identify new ones immediately. The sooner they can get them out of an unsheltered state, the better success they have.

Exploitation is very high with this population. Officer Savage emphasized that if you give to an organization helping the homeless, make sure it is a good one. He said they need people that are willing to go into the camps and help.

The website for NACH (www.nachcares.org) will show the numbers of chronically homeless as well as other numbers. The surveys can be adjusted and if additional data becomes available, that would be valuable.

Someone made the point that maybe the current systems we have for meeting the needs of the homeless are insufficient and we need to learn what we need to do to improve these systems.

Joy responded by saying that they have skilled social workers that try to identify barriers, but they can't force the homeless to do anything - they have to make the decision themselves.

For law enforcement issues contact Jonathan at (256)705-3073 or (preferably) email Jonathan.savage@huntsvilleal.gov

For other issues: Joy Davis at Joyce.davis@huntsvilleal.gov

Jonathan encourages people to help the homeless, but it is hard to actually do the work in the camps. It is frustrating work and going through the tough times is difficult. The outreach team does have resolve.

A question was asked if the program has been in existence long enough to have outcome data. They have been collecting data since 2022. The service providers turn in data numbers every month to the team. They have been in effect since early December 2023 and they are already able to show data on their effectiveness.

Open Floor

Karen Peterson mentioned the free car wash this Friday April 12th at Shine Time Super Wash in south Huntsville to benefit Wellstone.

*Next Meeting
Tuesday May 14, 2024
11:00 am at Wellstone*