



## North Alabama Mental Health Coalition September 12, 2023

### **Attendees (in person):**

Daniel Adamek (Little Orange Fish)  
Jennifer Blazer (ALSP)  
Rudolfo Chavez (SVDP)  
Tracy Doughty (Huntsville Hospital)  
Kelli Glass (Wellstone)  
Traci Harris (Elm Foundation)  
Daelyn Houser (Wellstone)  
Cathy Miller (United Way)  
Karen Petersen (Wellstone)  
Rex Reynolds (State Representative)  
Julie Schenck-Brown (Huntsville Police)  
Tim Ward (Sheriff's Office)

David Battle (Partnership for Drug Free)  
Annie Brasseale (VOP)  
Kayron Clay (Serenity Communities)  
La'trisha Coats Fletcher (DHR)  
Kelly Goff (ADMH)  
Zack Harris (Holder Construction)  
Tammy Leeth (Wellstone)  
Tealacy Mitchell (Thrive Alabama)  
Adina Peyton (GRAMI)  
Cheryl Russell (Drug Free Partnership)  
Dustin Spires (Madison Fire)  
Don Webster (HEMSI)

Callie Bengs (UNA)  
Richard Browning (CID)  
Gina Cushing (Our Place)  
Jennifer Geist (First Stop)  
Tammy Goodwin (ALNG)  
Chaniece Hicks (First Stop)  
Cheryl McClendon (Wellstone/WES)  
Jan Neighbors (HAPC)  
Mark Prescott (NAMI)  
Elizabeth Salgado (Huntsville Hospital)  
Kelly Vance (CRS)  
Mack Yates (SVDP/VOP)

### **Welcome and Introductions**

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

### **Mental Health Legislative Update – State Rep. Rex Reynolds**

Mack introduced State Rep. Rex Reynolds by saying that he has done a lot for mental health in Alabama.

Rex explained the history of how CIT started in North Alabama and that other states are now replicating it. It started with a meeting, but they brought in others (besides just law enforcement) such as the probate judge and the state legislature (Mac McCutcheon). The legislature has now included over \$300 million in crisis care over the mental health budget. Mac McCutcheon went before the governor and explained that more needs to be done for mental health in Alabama. They started a joint committee involving many stakeholders. There is already a bill with a 16-hour mental health requirement for all law enforcement officers. Johnny Hollingsworth travels throughout the state providing CIT classes, and now there is even a master class in CIT.

We have now opened 5 crisis centers in Alabama. We still need long-term care. There are 2 new beds in the center in Tuscaloosa. Crisis center #6 will be in the Dothan area. To be successful, officers must first be trained. Rex has also sponsored a bill working with the probate judges to create an involuntary commitment law. The crisis centers are working well - beds are full. At the opening in Birmingham last week, 68 involuntary commitments were already on standby. We now have to worry about funding them. There is still a long way to go.

On September 28<sup>th</sup> at 10am, the first joint mental health meeting will be held in Montgomery. They will discuss 988 legislation. Rex had to hold off on the 988 bill during the last session because very large budgets had just been passed and the legislature was about to make additional cuts for other things such as groceries. Rex is hoping that at the meeting on September 28<sup>th</sup> the committee will determine how to cut 988 expenses to just 40 or 50 cents on phone bills.

At 2:00pm on the 28<sup>th</sup>, the first opioid oversight commission will meet. They have \$300 million and are trying to determine who to fund. The legislature is funding a program to provide Narcan to addicts in the prisons. They are going to extend this to probationers as well, so it will hopefully cut down on reincarceration. They are trying to have a bill ready in the next session.

Rex reviewed the report from the 2022 Opioid council report to the governor. Their recommendations were very broad including prevention, treatment, and research. He has met with Attorney General Steve Marshall to review the settlement agreement and those provisions seem to be even more broad as to where the money should be allocated. Rex is the chairman of the commission and he is going to ask commissioners to stay focused.

Rex talked about the ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds allocation saying that he put a "community block" on some of the funds so they would go, not just to large organizations such as the hospitals, but also to smaller groups that work within the community to provide related services. He mentioned that \$2 million was recently distributed for autism testing.

Rex is the Alabama appointee to the Public Safety & Human Services Committee which met recently in South Carolina. When Rex spoke at the convention several years ago, he started talking about the work that Alabama is doing for mental health crisis care and many other states were looking to do what Alabama is doing.

This past convention, they applauded Alabama for their fentanyl bill.

Mack brought up that there are 2 big problems: long term treatment and staffing. Mack asked if it is a priority of the state to increase pay for mental health staff.

Rex said he had to move some funds from other projects to increase the mental health budget. Interest rates have gone up, so even though the big oil money goes to education, the interest goes to the general fund. Currently they have money coming in and they may be able to help with the staffing issue.

Mack asked if the state has money specifically set aside for mental health staffing costs.

Rex said it is not specifically set aside as staffing money, but earmarked as “program costs”.

Jennifer mentioned that opioid funds were given to Wellstone, Huntsville Hospital and First Stop. She said they are going to meet together to collaborate on what they are all doing with the funds and collecting metrics of the success of what they do with the funds. She mentioned that all three groups are going to use a portion of the money for staffing because you need the staff to run the programs.

Rex said they don't want to budget money specifically for bricks and mortar and personnel, because when the money goes away, it is difficult to retain those positions. In the world of organizations, you have to use the money for personnel because they run the programs.

He said they are hoping to start out small with funding of organizations that deal with the opioid crisis, track what they are doing with the money and if they are successful, continue to fund them.

Daniel asked where can you find out where the money is going and how well the organizations that get the money are doing. Rex said it is not there yet.

After the money has gone to the prison system, there will still be \$8.5 million available to apply for and it will be going to mental health. They are interested in who applies for this money and the work that they will be doing. The Department of Mental Health will be opening up the grant process.

Don Webster shared that in 2022 there were 2.5 opioid overdoses per day in the Huntsville metro area. This year from January to July, there were 2.7 opioid overdoses per day and 3 deaths per week. Don is concerned that there is no follow-up for those who are resuscitated. Many will just do it again.

Rex was unsure about what to do. There is a possibility of a hospital in south Alabama for long-term beds. The people who are in long-term care are not leaving. We need more beds.

Don also asked if any of the mental health money is earmarked for adolescents. Right now, if adolescents have a mental health crisis, they go into the hospital and wait for a long-term bed. There are no pediatric beds in Madison County. Rex allocated \$5 million for the adolescent wing of WES, but it wasn't a separate line item so it didn't get approved last year. It is on the budget again this year as a line item.

Someone brought up that even though there are more mental health workers in schools, Alabama now requires parents to “opt” into the services. The state has placed an additional barrier on the services for juveniles to access these services because a lot of parents don't think their child needs them. There is still a stigma.

Rex said if there is a crisis then the child will get the services. After the crisis is over, there are not enough providers in Alabama for juveniles.

Daniel asked if someone is looking at the mental health needs of the state. Rex said the budget comes from the Department of Mental Health. Sometimes there are needs outside of Department of Mental Health that go straight to his committee (like the probate judges request for money) and they can get approved, but the Department of Mental Health is the best place to start. The grant process is a good place for non-state agencies to get some of the \$8.7 million.

Someone asked if there is any legislation that deals with affordable housing.

Rex said they did include housing in the ARPA money. He complimented the City of Huntsville for the project on Governor's Drive.

Someone asked about the new legislation that would prohibit someone with mental health issues from getting a firearm. They would be added to the database of people banned from buying firearms. But what if they are caught with a firearm anyway? What happens then? They could be charged with a federal crime. The law enforcement officer will know if the person is banned from carrying when he checks the database. This is much more difficult to control now that the open carry law has been passed.

The meeting on the September 28<sup>th</sup> will be open to the public. It will be held in Room 200 at 2:00 pm.

### **DHARMA Recovery – Robert Baker**

Robert Baker is a member of the Recovery Dharma local community (sangha) which is a peer led, non-theistic addiction recovery process based on Buddhist principles. They welcome everyone, regardless of their addiction. Recovery Dharma believes in an individual's capacity to change and heal on their own. Their website is [www.recoverydharma.org](http://www.recoverydharma.org).

The local group is part of the non-profit organization Dharma International which is currently in 9 countries, with 5 locations in Alabama. Local members join together to support each other in recovery.

The meeting format includes a welcome, meditation, questions or discussions, or a member could bring up their own topic. There is an emphasis on mindfulness and being present in the moment. The core emphasis is on safe supportive meetings while respecting confidentiality. They operate independently.

Robert reviewed the 4 Buddhist truths of suffering as well as the 8-fold path to recovery.

He stressed again that they are non-theist and that each individual is responsible for his/ her own recovery. Recovery Dharma is complimentary to other programs; the main difference is the meditation practice.

They meet on Monday and Thursday at 6:30 pm at the Center for Spiritual Living in South Huntsville. All meetings are open.

*Next Meeting*  
*Tuesday October 10, 2023*  
*11:00 am at Wellstone*