



North Alabama Mental Health Coalition January 9, 2024

Attendees (in person):

Daniel Adamek (Little Orange Fish)
Kelli Arthur (VA)
Annie Brasseale (VOP)
Judge Sybil Cleveland (HSV Municipal Ct)
Chaniece Hicks (First Stop)
Debbie Igou (SOS)
Tammy Leeth (Probate Judge's Office)
Jessica Mullins (NAHCC)
Rachell Pyle (City of Huntsville)
Jakob Shilt (VA Police)
Terre Stewart (Wellstone)
Don Webster (HEMSI)

Jessica Alford (First Stop)
Kim Bigelow (Warrior Wellness Program)
Darlene Burton (Salvation Army)
Jennifer Geist (First Stop)
Anna Hile (Crisis Services)
Kati Lang (Amedisys Home Health)
Alexis Love (Wellstone)
Jan Neighbors (HAPC)
Joshua Rivera (Family Services Center)
Ashley Smith (Salvation Army)
Sonya Tinsley (NAHCC)

Kenny Anderson (City of Huntsville)
Jennifer Blazer (ALSP)
Aubin Cawthon (Ross)
Jessica Hays (Huntsville Hospital)
Kim Holder (Not One More Alabama)
Sammie Laster (GRAMI)
Andrea Massey (Wellstone)
Karen Petersen (Wellstone)
Julie Schenck-Brown (Huntsville Police)
Paula Steele (Wellstone/WES)
Lakebra Walker (Alliance Health)

Welcome and Introductions

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

Huntsville Municipal Court – Judge Sybil Cleveland

Judge Cleveland is the Municipal Court judge for the City of Huntsville. Starting in 1999, she was recently appointed for a 7th term. She started as an assistant District Attorney in Birmingham and was then recruited by Huntsville. She has a staff of over 50 employees. They handle misdemeanor cases that go through municipal court. They have the opportunity to intervene and help those before they become felony offenders.

When Judge Cleveland came to the court, there were few options for sentencing (e.g., go to jail or probation). If a person had mental health issues, there was nothing that the courts could do. We live in a collaborative community so she went out into the community to find out what resources were available. There was a new steering community starting up with the (then) director of Wellstone, Judge Little, Judge Karen Hall and other stake holders to development a way to handle those with mental health issues that end up in the justice system. Judge Cleveland was brought in because they knew they needed to involve the municipal courts. They studied other communities to see how they handled mental health courts. They developed their own system and started taking case referrals in September 2004. In the Mental Health court setting everyone showed up! They felt like someone is finally listening to their issues. Judge Cleveland created a court culture where the issues are taken seriously and everyone is treated with respect. The Mental Health court has been a success and is greatly supported by city and county leaders and other legislators. She has developed a system where resource providers and case managers are providing what those in the court are needing. They field the resource providers to help connect people to the resources where they will maximize their treatment. The Mental Health Court has affected thousands of lives, bringing them help and hope.

Given the success of the Mental Health Court, Judge Cleveland decided to expand the court system to help veterans as well. Four years ago, she started the Veterans Court and they have a 99% compliance. The Mental Health court has about 90 - 95% compliance. She also started a court for the unhoused community with the help of Jennifer Geist. In the last year and a half, they have started a docket for the unhoused community and now there is 90% compliance. They have also housed 10 people in the past year. It is not just about housing. They have to be held to the same accountability as the others. The Unhoused Court docket looks like social service meeting, but as a result, they are able to deal with the unhoused needs right there. The collaborative community helps so much. The focus is on rehabilitation and hopefulness. She strongly believes that the programs are a team effort. She likes restorative justice from the bench instead of always using punishment.

She then told the personal side of her career. She grew up in Hartselle, but always wanted to be a lawyer. Her parents both passed away and she was inspired to return to school after having dropped out at Calhoun Community College. She attended the University of North Alabama and Cumberland Law School.

She thanked everyone for all that they do.

Mack said he appreciates all she does and that she epitomizes everything that we are trying to do - cooperation and collaboration.

Decatur West – Amy Gillott

Amy told a little of her history. She started 26 years ago first as a PRN floor nurse, then as a supervisor and now as the director at Decatur West for 10 years. There has been lots of change in the past 10 years, especially since COVID has had such a major impact for children and adolescents. After COVID, she decided to close the geriatric beds (since they have other alternatives) and create a middle school unit starting with 16 beds.

We were sending children and adolescents all over the state and now they can stay locally. They now have a 12-bed children's unit, a 16-bed middle school unit and an 18-bed high school unit. They receive grant money from the State to offer school to the children every day. When they come in, acute care is provided for 7 to 10 days so there is not a lot of schooling in the beginning (but they have access to online schooling). Decatur West also offers Occupational Therapy because they have a lot of kids on the spectrum. They have a sensory room to help calm the children.

They offer collaborative and proactive solutions which is a program where they try to determine what triggers a child. The children they deal with have had a lot of trauma and have triggers that a normal child wouldn't have. The staff has been trained to avoid triggers that might cause children to have an outburst.

They also do MOAB training which trains people to deal with aggressive behavior and how to deescalate situations, and to identify what triggers it.

The volume is down right now because of Christmas break when they try to get the children home to their families. After Christmas, their admissions will climb back up.

Some of their patients have nowhere to go at Christmas. There is a great need for therapeutic foster care.

Amy gave an example of a little girl that came to them from an abusive situation. She has gone into a therapeutic foster situation. She said the lack of family support is unreal compared to when she first started 26 years ago. Now there are many additional issues to deal with such as social media bullying and gender issues. There is a failure on the outpatient end. It is easier to readmit a child than to have their outpatient care be successful. It is difficult to find providers that accept Medicaid. The waiting list for therapy is sometimes 5 months out. They give their patients 30 days of prescriptions when they leave; however, it is hard to find GPs that will refill their prescriptions before they can see a psych doctor. Amy feels like we are failing our children. She is hopeful that they can use space in their facilities for outpatient and long-term residential care. They are the only ones between Vanderbilt and UAB for children with mental health issues. If they had additional staffing, they could increase by 10 beds.

First Stop – Jennifer Geist

They have moved into their new facility and plan to have a grand opening ceremony on Thursday, February 1st. The ribbon cutting will be at 4:00 pm and there will be tours from 4 to 6pm as well as a reception. Their new building is 206 Stokes St. which is the same location as their old building.

The City of Huntsville has awarded opioid settlement fund grants to Wellstone, First Stop, and the Huntsville Hospital Foundation. They will be working on initiatives to address those addiction issues. Jessica Alford is now with First Stop and she works to make referrals to get people into appropriate treatment programs and follow them in their progress. They have grant money to help pay for treatment. They are also working on training the staff to handle overdoses to prevent deaths.

Jennifer hopes to come back with an update on how the grant money is being used by the three organizations that received it.

The ribbon cutting ceremony for the new First Stop facility will be held on Thursday, February 1st at 4 pm and everyone is invited.

Long Term Treatment Gap – Mack Yates SVDP/VOP

There has been a lot of progress made since 2015, however the gap of not having a long-term treatment facility is the major contributor to the "revolving door". This affects the hospital, the jail, the streets and the homeless

camps where they end up there after they get out of jail or the hospital. The medications and the therapy just don't work on some people. It also effects HEMSI and police. Most of all, it effects families and the person who is ill. They fall through the cracks.

Mack implored the Alabama Department of Mental Health and the State legislators to realize the deepness of the problem. Long term treatment centers need to be prioritized. Currently, the jail is the biggest long term mental health facility in the state. This "revolving door" situation will never end until we see that short term solutions don't work on the seriously mentally ill.

Open Floor

Aubin Cawthon works for the Recovery Organization Support Specialists (ROSS) and they just opened the Madison County Recovery Community Center on Stephanie Dr. in south Huntsville. ROSS staff are all certified recovery support specialists and they can connect people with the resources they need. They provide 3 meals a day as well as a computer lab and support groups. They are open 7 days a week from 9 am to 9 pm. Since they opened in July there are usually 30 to 50 people in the center every day. Aubin left cards at the meeting, invited everyone to stop by and those interested in a tour can contact him.

Jakob Shilt is a police officer who is new to Huntsville from Arizona. Someone suggested that he look at the VA police which is a police department that works with veterans to get them the help they need. There is a new program called VRT where veterans can call and get help with resources. If veterans call in with mental health issues, homelessness, substance abuse, etc., they will have crisis services to contact. They can help officers on the road to get help for veterans. Soon there will be VA officers to help in the community. The goal of the program to help veterans. He encourages anyone in the coalition who could help support veterans to give him their information so he can use them as a resource.

Lakebra Walker works with the Alliance Health Care. The facility is in Mississippi but Lakebra is local (covering north Alabama). Alliance is a dual diagnosis treatment facility for substance and psych (but mainly psych). They offer up to 90 days of treatment and in network with insurance companies including Medicare. They will pick up patients, get them an evaluation and put them in the correct level of care. She is a mental health peer. She encouraged us to contact her if we know of someone that needs these services.

Next Meeting
Tuesday February 13, 2024
11:00 am at Wellstone