

Mental Health, Substance Use, and Homelessness

Southeast Arizona Town Hall

October 14, 2022 – Thatcher, AZ

THE INTERSECTION OF MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS

Mental health, substance use, and homelessness are intertwined and relate to each other. Having one of these challenges often exacerbates or leads to the others. Too often we separate these issues and do not consider them together as contributing factors to each other.

Mental health issues, including trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), can lead to substance use and mental health challenges. Mental health challenges are too often stigmatized, causing people to self-medicate with substance use. These challenges can, in turn, cause homelessness, making homelessness the symptom or result of substance use or mental health issues.

Similarly, if someone does not have their basic needs met, such as housing and food, they will not be able to address mental health challenges.

Solving these issues is a marathon and not a sprint. The stigma and challenges involved require sustained effort.

In rural communities there are few resources for addressing mental health challenges. This can then cause people to use substances to cope, which leads to additional challenges.

Addressing all of these problems together will provide better outcomes in addressing each individual area. These issues do not happen in a vacuum and the entire community is impacted. It is not “their problem,” it is everyone’s problem.

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS

In Southeastern Arizona we have some behavioral health and mental health facilities and services such as Community Partner Integrated Healthcare (CPIH), Southeastern Arizona Behavioral Health Services (SEABHS), Easter Seals, Blake Foundation, and others. There are substance use programs for children, and some limited facilities for people working on recovery. We also have parenting, mentoring and life skills classes. Our community works hard to collaborate and work together.

There is much room for improvement. First, there is simply not enough funding. Some of the services available are based on grants which may be limited in time and scope. There are not enough residential facilities to stabilize people and we have a shortage of mental health counselors and services. To get providers to come to a rural area, we need to have salaries and housing competitive with urban areas. In addition, services that are available are often limited only to those with AHCCCS coverage, which leaves many without the ability to get needed treatment.

We simply do not have enough funding to support our community’s needs. We are spending money on probation, jails, and the court system and 97-98% of these costs are related to substance use. If we want to make a difference, we should consider focusing more on prevention and being proactive instead of reactive.

We are working hard with prevention efforts in the schools. We might have even greater success if we can figure out how to bring these prevention efforts into the home. We could improve success with greater collaboration and coordination between service providers, faith-based organization, families, and others.

To find the best solutions to these issues, we should bring in the perspectives and lived wisdom of those currently experiencing mental health, substance use, or homelessness. With their perspective

and insights in mine, we should create the services and programs that best help to remove or address the barriers to success that they identify. We should also look at way to follow up with people to encourage entering or continuing treatment.

We should consider how better to connect people with needed services. This could include more individual advocates to physically navigate people to the services they need, and a centralized place that lists all resources available or connects people to resources (such as the 211 line). We need a local Assessment and Intervention Center (AIC) and Behavioral Health Residential Facility (BHRF) so that families do not have to be separated and people are not dropped at emergency rooms where they have waited up to twelve days to get needed treatment. We desperately need these services in our county; funding and staffing are the major roadblocks for making this happen.

SETTING PRIORITIES

1. More networking with other agencies and organizations is critical so that we can share knowledge and resources.
2. We should encourage more integrated responses. As an example, medical clinics should do more whole assessments with those they serve and have resources available for mental health issues.
3. Having the people to provide services is essential. We need more support for service providers and caregivers so that they are more resilient to burnout. This can include resiliency and vicarious trauma training (some of which is already available for a reasonable cost).
4. Communication
 - a. Sit down with and inform elected leaders about these issues and the real costs to the community and invite them to spend a day “in the trenches” to get a better understanding of the issues.
 - b. Training to the community about the impact on people’s mental capacity when they are using substances or if they are addicted.
 - c. Increase the visibility of services that are available, perhaps with having local businesses, government organizations, and others providing resources at their locations. Ensure that resources are available in bilingual and alternative formats to ensure a broader reach for those who may have challenges reading.
 - d. Better communication about what the true cost is to the county of these issues may help raise awareness of how best to move forward.
5. Funding: we need more to support all of these actions.
6. We should think about how we can best measure success and plan programs and services with this in mind.

WHAT ARIZONA’S ELECTED LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

Find ways to fund needed programs.

1. Provide more funding to rural communities to attract and retain mental health professionals. Consider a loan reimbursement program, salary incentives, or programs focused on “growing our own.”
2. Analyze how we are spending money on the criminal justice system and consider whether this would be better spent with prevention and intervention services.
3. Find ways to create internships with university students to bring them here.

4. Work with behavioral health agencies to create training programs, including on the job training programs.
5. Use national and other resources to create programs that support peer training and peer support to augment other services. Educate leaders on why and how it can make a difference to remove barriers to employment for those with criminal backgrounds.

INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENTS TO ACTION

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions during the Southeast Arizona Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Educate more people in the community.
- Do more to educate our community about mental health and destigmatize mental health disorders.
- I will work to organize a resource guide for professionals in Graham County.
- I will be an advocate for resources in my community. These issues affect all aspects of our community.
- Educate my community about the importance of integrated care. Mental health care is health care.
- Continue to feed information back to leadership and company partners.
- Try and help more.
- Educate more people in the community on substance use, medically assisted treatment, and harm reduction.
- Try to get more involved with different community resources.
- Learn about all the resources, that the community has and how to get the help for those who need it.
- Continue to advocate for special populations in need and attend more Town Hall meetings.
- Incorporate what has been shared today into our health focus area for our organization.
- Continue to educate myself on needs in the community and to serve.
- Share the tremendous cost to the Graham County taxpayer as a result of substance use and the opportunities lost as a result.
- Get out and volunteer my services to organizations that are working to address these issues.
- Do my best to help join others to improve the needs of our community. Also, encourage others to speak up about ideas for helping the community.