

Mental Health, Substance Use, and Homelessness

Verde Valley Community Town Hall

October 26, 2022 – Clarkdale, AZ

THE INTERSECTION OF MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS

Mental health substance use, and homelessness are connected and need to be addressed together. While not always cooccurring, they are often related, with one leading to the other. Many individuals may have mental health issues that may then lead to substance use and homelessness. Or, someone can experience homelessness which then leads to substance use through self-medication. These issues create many personal, family, and societal issues that impact core issues within our society and need to be addressed together.

In Yavapai County, there is a significant segment of the population that show this interconnection of all these issues. For example, public law enforcement records show an increasing number of trespassing on property due to homelessness. A number of these issues are referrals to Spectrum, due to behavioral issues. The number of issues has been increasing in recent years. Outreach collaborative programs have seen intersectionality among these three issues, creating a vicious cycle.

There is an increased level of housing insecurity in Yavapai County, due in part to a higher level of short-term rental inventory. More affordable housing needs to be addressed. The lack of affordable housing is a contributor to homelessness. Working people are homeless in our county; they live in campers or vans due to the lack of affordable housing. This particular population may not have mental health or substance use issues. Programs are trying to house families with young children to give family units some sort of stability. Housing instability affects children's learning and mental health, and it has an impact on those who already have mental health issues.

These issues should be addressed together, and they should be addressed early on before the cycle starts, using as many preventative programs as possible, especially with our children. We should come from a place of compassion in reaching out to those who need assistance. Interactions with those who are unhoused need to be sensitive to trauma they may have experienced, and with the knowledge that they are worried about meeting their most basic needs. Medications can also assist helping homeless people who have mental health issues.

We should also support programs that allow formerly incarcerated people to transition effectively into the community. A Yavapai program, Yavapai Re-entry Project, that addresses all three issues together for those individuals who have transitioned from incarceration to community, has met with increased levels of success. People looking for support have many levels of concern that should be addressed for them to live independently and regain a sense of community. The Veterans Administration also addresses all levels of care instead of one issue at a time.

We should also continue to have events like this that bring the community together and connect resources, people, and organizations.

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS

Yavapai County shines in working together on issues and more collective work is needed. Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), the Mental Health Justice Coalition, MATFORCE, the Yavapai County Substance Abuse Coalition and Collective impact partners are examples of collaboration. In addition, Manzanita Outreach focuses on resource sharing as many people do not know of the resources that exist. All of these groups are open to others joining them in working together on mental health, substance use, and homelessness.

In the Verde Valley, we have resources available, but they don't focus enough on housing or having a place to sleep. Once Maslow's basic needs are taken care of, other issues can be better addressed.

Unfortunately, funding can be siloed with a patchwork of services that are in place but not working effectively together to stop the revolving door for those who have multiple needs. A more integrated approach, perhaps led by a governmental entity, could help.

The Verde Valley is looking at a more regional approach to addressing these issues, with different organizations taking turns on providing resources and services. By collaborating with others, we learn more about difficult situations that exist, on an individual and system basis. Northern Arizona Interfaith groups have worked together to learn more about what has happened and is happening with housing inventory that affects residents. Housing option opportunities are offered with the caveat that people do not use substances. This restriction could eliminate some individuals in need. We also need to look at certain populations and their individualized needs. For example, people who are widowed or separated who need socialization as well as people who may come from different cultures or have language barriers.

NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard) is a huge challenge for solving issues with mental health, substance use, and homelessness. These issues are in our backyard. We need to address NIMBYism with more community conversations and through high level policy changes.

Various organizations have come forward with applications to provide housing for the homeless. Staffing issues have caused issues with continuity of providing affordable housing to those in need who may bring in critical problems, such as drug overdoses. It is difficult to find the answer to this complicated problem.

Bringing together people from diverse backgrounds can help in finding ways to approach these complicated challenges. We should bring everyone into this conversation and raise awareness and understanding about the underlying causes and how best to assist those in need.

We need early prevention efforts, including education in the schools that helps to reduce the stigma. We should make it easier to talk about these issues so that people know they are not alone and can be connected to available resources. We need multiple entry points that accept people where they are when they are seeking assistance. We should prioritize individuals and individual approaches that will assist with recovery and support. And we need to normalize the discussion about mental health substance use and homelessness.

The criminal justice system should be an opportunity to identify those with needs and to then connect people to available resources. To prevent people from entering the criminal justice system, we should expand co-response models with first responders and law enforcement. We should also expand and support peer support which can be very beneficial.

Finally, we need to ask the federal government for more funds for housing support. We also need to address short-term rentals, specifically we need to have the state change the laws that do not currently allow local communities to regulate short term housing, because this is creating a lack of housing affordability.

SETTING PRIORITIES

The following actions are critical to address the conditions of mental health, substance use, and homelessness in an integrated way.

Conversation and dialogue among all community-based groups and circles of influence need to acknowledge that we're in a crisis. We need to bring our resources together by collaborating among different organizations, especially those comprised of our diverse populations. All people need to be involved to consider possible solutions and they need to learn more about these three issues to make educated decisions. There needs to be more education on the complexity of this integrated challenge.

This affects people of every age group, and, in particular, new residents who have moved into our region and are not aware of available local resources.

We also need to enhance the capacity to work with individuals on an individualized or case by case basis.

Funding for additional support is always needed to support existing programs, including housing.

Education is critical as is having people who are willing and open to listening. We can use social media and other outlets to raise awareness about these issues which helps to reduce the stigma and connect those who need assistance to different programs and resources. Having a general educational program that raises understanding, such as teacher prep programs would help support students better. However, we need even more: we need a local, state, and national effort, similar to what was done with breast cancer, that raises awareness, reduces stigma, and provides a QR code or other link with resources for education and assistance. This widespread marketing campaign could include bumper stickers and other media promotions accomplished through both individual and organizational efforts.

We need to make resources more available to those who are suffering from these challenges and talk more to reduce the stigma and educate those who need help with resources, including medications.

We need a Verde Valley crisis stabilization unit.

Using our voice and the resources that already exist—including the right to vote—are important. We need to vote and share our opinions at programs like this.

We need to reevaluate high level policies that prevent communities from taking integrated actions, including educating judges, addressing issues such as zoning, and establishing a local housing authority/land trust to take advantage of federal funds.

We also need to work with the legislature on short term housing so that more affordable housing options can exist. NIMBYism has pushed back on creating or sustaining multi-family housing, further exacerbating housing issues in certain areas.

In other countries they have a mindset of working to live instead of living to work. We could take inspiration from these other countries which would help address stresses that underlie some mental health challenges.

Mental health challenges should be treated like physical or body health issues.

Finally, we need more town halls like this.

WHAT ARIZONA'S ELECTED LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

Reform the financial platform of Arizona's Governor Homeless Committee to filter this money accountably to local governments who can then implement these Town Hall recommendations at a grassroots level with oversight.

Open your eyes to the opportunities we have. These problems are happening as we speak. Change needs to happen and starting now is better than never. We as a community should be standing as one.

Remove political labels and govern for all constituencies.

Attend a town hall in a different area or with a different culture from your own.

Create an Arizona interagency council on homelessness to establish and support community-based teams made of a mix of psychiatrists, social workers, and law enforcement to address these issues on a case-by-case basis.

Increase education with younger generations and schools to educate them before these problems begin to give the next generations resources at a young age which would help with the bad stigma that follows it and so that they are more comfortable talking about their problems when they need help. The

kids can go home and talk to their parents about it. That would most likely be an eye opener for the parents.

Show up, actively listen, and represent the people to remove the obstacles for solving these issues.

One size does not fit all. Each community is unique. It is important for us to collaborate on all different levels of government and come together with public and private partnerships. Sufficient resources need to be gathered to address this integrated challenge. The state legislature places its will on local governments. State level bills have a tendency to re-appear; one proposed bill, in particular, would override local zoning ordinances, in which case, the state legislature would decide on local density. Communities know their local situation, what resources are needed and what works best for them. The current state budget surplus should be distributed for needed local services determined by local governments.

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 Valley Verde Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Work together with Northern Arizona Interfaith Council to build awareness about local and state government issues, especially with housing, mental health, and substance use. The faith-based organizations are aware of these issues and could address them through legislative actions. Currently, these situations are being addressed downstream with temporary solutions to major problems that need to be addressed more comprehensively through systemic legislative actions.
- Continue to work with my colleagues within the Verde Valley and through our state lobbyists to educate legislators and to testify before committees.
- Arrange a field trip to Yavapai (VV) College for my Rotary Club.
- Arrange a town hall for our Senior High Interact kids with our Senior Rotary Club.
- Not just pass by an individual, but I will stop and reach out for their specific need and advocate for the homeless, mentally ill, and drug addicted.
- Advocate for the mental health of my students through compassionate, open education on social and emotional supports and lessons.
- Be an advocate for all of this, I am a peer and have started a grassroots program that addresses all of these issues. I will connect, collaborate, and stand for what I believe in! There is hope.
- Collaborate with cities across the Verde Valley to help solve homelessness, mental health, and drug use.
- Share about non-profit organizations and share about mental health and substance use, especially among my classes and schoolmates.
- Help people who need it. I would like to be able to show them the way before the consequences are too important for their future life, especially amongst young people.
- Help in my community, talk about it, and make other people be inspired by our ideas and us.
- Continue to reach out to young participants in future leaders to explore ways to improve and sustain their engagement with AZ Town Hall, as well as with community-based organizations addressing these issues.

- Continue to participate in my community, but not be afraid to say “no” and feel good about take care of myself.
- Continue to support Resident Council Hope House.
- Vote.
- Stay informed.
- Read town hall reports in library and actions.
- Connect with local homeless at St. Andrew dinners.
- Be socially active and contact legislators.
- Use my voice to make a difference and publicize resources available.