

Community driven re-entry: How Sevier County is addressing the substance abuse crisis

By Greta Hacker

Though mental illness may not be many people's go-to example of an economic issue, it is a public health concern with steep economic consequences for communities. According to pharmaco-economic studies, the economic burden of adults with major depressive disorder was an estimated \$326 billion in 2018. Substance use disorder also had a substantial yearly impact—\$442 billion—according to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* and the National Drug Intelligence Center.

People with mental illnesses need community support and acceptance, but due to pervasive stigma, they often experience social rejection instead. The academic journal *Administration and Policy in Mental Health* documents widespread and long-ranging public perceptions that individuals with mental illness are violent, dangerous to themselves and others, lazy, criminals, and at fault for their own mental health issues.

Stigma contributes to a societal reluctance to provide mental health services, which makes it difficult for people to get treatment. According to community-based nonprofit Mental Health America (mhanational.org), one in five adults with mental health conditions reported being unable to receive treatment due to systemic barriers such as cost, lack of access to providers or lack of insurance.

COVID-19 has only compounded these concerns. Dr. Jennifer Conner, associate professor in the NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine, places an imperative on local officials to address mental health issues, emphasizing that “now more than ever, community leaders must prioritize social connectedness and build community resilience.”

Combating the stigma in Sevier County

In southwest Arkansas, leaders of the Sevier County jail exemplify what can happen when local government officials challenge mental health stigma and step up to provide vital treatment.

Launched in 2017, the Sevier County Residential Substance Abuse Treatment (RSAT) program helps inmates with substance use issues achieve sobriety

through community-based counseling and programming. The program aims to help offenders re-enter society as productive and healthy citizens in both their professional and personal lives. The program offers waived or reduced sentences for successful completion of a 90-day inpatient program and provides graduates with nine months of transitional support upon release.

The RSAT program is funded by a federal grant administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Sevier County Sheriff Robert Gentry and Jail Administrator Chris Wolcott deliver the program locally.

Sheriff Gentry said that as a longtime law enforcement official, it took a change in his own attitude to recognize why drug offenders needed treatment instead of punishment. “Chris and I both would put on our uniform and come to work on patrol, and our whole goal that night was to put some [drug user] in jail. And if they didn't get the maximum sentence, our feelings got hurt, because we didn't do our job,” Gentry said. “After 20 years, we figured out that wasn't working.”

Gentry noted that the push for starting the RSAT program came when he and his team observed the success of volunteer programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous in the Sevier County jail, most of which were facilitated by local church groups. However, he noted that to launch the program, he and his team had to take responsibility.

“We're taking an active stance instead of sitting back and saying, ‘That's not my problem,’” Gentry said. “We're accepting the fact that we are people in power...and we are in the position to facilitate these changes.”


Wolcott noted that as the program developed, so did his team's understanding of mental health and its relation to substance abuse. They learned that because substance abuse is often related to underlying mental health concerns, such as childhood abuse and neglect, they needed to provide mental health interventions to help inmates achieve sobriety. Through administering the RSAT program, he and his team learned that they had to look to their constituents for guidance. “When you actually get to talk to [inmates], and you listen to them, you figure out what you think they need is different than what they need,” he said.

The RSAT program has had positive economic and community impacts, both inside and outside the jail. More than two-thirds of program graduates have successfully remained substance-free and have not re-entered the prison system. This recidivism rate is low compared to the state, which has a 57 percent recidivism rate according to the Arkansas Department of Corrections. Inside the jail, the program has contributed to a \$15,000 reduction in property damage and reduced inmate altercations and disciplinary infractions, Wolcott said.

The program has also revealed a greater need for substance use treatment services in the community as families and friends of inmates were driven to seek help for their own addictions. Since the RSAT program started, community programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous have gone from meeting once a week to seven days a week, and attendance has more than doubled.

Gentry and Wolcott offer two key pieces of advice to local officials hoping to start their own substance use treatment programs: Develop partnerships with your local faith-based community and seek guidance from communities that are already doing the work you hope to begin.

“If there’s a community that wants to see what we’re doing here in our jail, then they’re welcome to call us and set up a visit,” Wolcott said.

To find out more information about the Sevier County Residential Substance Abuse Treatment program, email cwolcott@seviersheriffar.org, or call the Sevier County Sheriff’s Office at 870-642-2125. 



Greta Hacker is the graduate assistant at the UCA Center for Community and Economic Development. You can contact her at mhacker1@cub.uca.edu or 501-852-2394.



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*1510 S. Broadway, Little Rock, AR 72202
Phone: 501-375-1786
Email: natem@etcengineersinc.com
Website: www.etcengineersinc.com*

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