

Mental Health, Substance Use, and Homelessness

Cochise County Community Town Hall

September 20, 2022 – Sierra Vista, AZ

THE INTERSECTION OF MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS

Mental health, substance use, and homelessness are linked, and we need to address them together. You can have one issue without having the others, but to solve these issues, you cannot address one without addressing all of them. Putting these issues in different silos has not worked well for solving them. Experiencing one of these challenges can create a domino effect with other issues. It is like a Venn diagram with all of them intersecting with each other, whether through adverse childhood experiences, lack of knowledge, financial challenges, losing a job, poverty, the inability to find housing or other resources, or mental health issues, including undiagnosed mental health challenges.

As we address these issues we should look at where there are gaps and how we can connect schools, community, and other organizations together. We need to fill these gaps and allow those who want and need services to access them. In addressing these issues, we need to work to remove the stigma that keeps many people from seeking help for their mental health challenges and utilize people who have lived experiences as advocates and connectors.

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS

These issues are all around us. It is not just the people sitting on the streets. It includes our neighbors, friends, and coworkers.

Education and awareness are important, both education about resources and educating people on how to help others. We also need to educate more educators.

We need to meet people where they are. There should be “no wrong door”. Wherever someone goes for resources, they should be directed to the resources they need and not just turned away. Coming from a place of compassion and utilizing those who have shared experiences can help with connecting to those who need resources.

In addition to educating people about available resources, we need to ensure that resources are coordinated and do not overlap or compete with each other. We should explore existing resources to fill in the gaps of need and create a closed loop referral system following up on those who seek help to ensure they are traversing through the systems in a helpful way.

We need to look at how to improve “systems literacy”, the knowledge of what systems are available and how to navigate them. We need to analyze the systems we have created and ensure the people we are trying to help have the knowledge and ability to get help.

Prevention is critical. We need to start young and increase awareness and education about mental health issues and adverse childhood experiences. Many have been conditioned to keep their issues quiet and to not reach out when they have problems. We need to reduce these barriers to help eliminate the stigma attached to these challenges and do our best to create safe opportunities for people to share and seek assistance.

Community conversations are important. We should put the right people in the right room together at the right time to look at these issues in a more coordinated and collaborative way.

We could establish a task force that creates a common vision and mission for organizations and others to work together. As part of these efforts, we need to include the voices of those who have lived experiences, including our youth, and recognize one size does not fit all.

Cochise County needs a crisis center, like the one in Yavapai County. We should partner with companies to support existing efforts to build a crisis center since it will help to create the future workforce they want.

Housing is also important to address. We should visit shelters to have a greater understanding of the issues, create more affordable housing, and support programs that give purpose and value to the unhoused, such as allowing them to have earned income.

SETTING PRIORITIES

1. Education and the Media.
 - a. We should better utilize the media in an integrated way to spread the word – locally, statewide, and federally.
 - b. Increase outreach – include peer-to-peer outreach, the use of navigators and the use of those with lived experiences.
 - c. Educate family members who need assistance and provide more shelters that address the whole scope of the problem.
 - d. Survey those with lived experiences.
2. Funding.
 - a. Understanding funding opportunities would help us take better data-based positions on solutions.
 - b. Use funding for the education of first responders such as police, so they can respond more effectively to those in crisis.
 - c. Spread the word about and support the crisis center that will soon be opening in Cochise County.
3. The best approaches.
 - a. Understanding what each person is going through is important when addressing solutions.
 - b. Utilize flexible approaches to get people on the right path – including flexible work and housing options.
 - c. Increase coordination and collaboration to meet people where they are.
 - d. Create platforms that allow people to access resources and education more easily such as a county-wide behavioral dashboard that would help spread the word to the broader community.
 - e. Make it easier to get needed help including, “one stop shop” services that utilize collaborative and integrative approaches for assistance.
 - f. Utilize navigators more, the “no wrong door” approach and closed loop referral methods.
 - g. Use intervention instead of punishment for those who are experiencing challenges.
 - h. As a community, we all need to be more empathetic and compassionate to those facing challenges.

WHAT ARIZONA’S ELECTED LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

- Take the time to educate yourselves. Listen to the viewpoints and conversations of those experiencing these issues and participate in the conversations.

- Have less judgment and more compassion. Spend the day in the shoes of those with low self-esteem, limited resources and who are experiencing mental health, substance use, and homelessness.
- Accept that the issue *is* in our backyard.
- This is not about politics or political parties; this is about people.
- Avoid generalizing and making negative assumptions. Look at people individually.
- Make more resources available for those who need access to resources.
- The funding and timelines for existing programs are not working. Reassess and re-plan these programs. Create opportunities, like the bracelets that signify someone you can talk to, to guide people to services.
- Revamp the RBHA system and award the contracts based on needs and services.
- Utilize existing resources in the community.
- Educate law enforcement on how better to respond to those experiencing these issues.
- Provide funding to educate educators.
- Revamp funding and programs to reach people where they are at.
- Instead of funding homeless shelters, fund transition facilities.
- Take a holistic approach and be proactive instead of reactive.
- Have more compassion, be more trauma informed and realize that these issues impact all of us.
- Expand the low-income housing tax credits further into rural areas, which will better allow for needed resources, such as housing programs, qualified behavioral personnel, and related programs.
- Stop prioritizing spending on private prisons and redirect that to community integration.
- Be more intentional on long lasting solutions as opposed to temporary short-term solutions and utilize all sources of communication in the same way you use those communication sources to campaign to get elected.

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 Cochise County Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Focus on connecting with the Cochise Coalition on Ending Chronic Homelessness.
- Help educate about mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness. Will take any training and opportunity to be educated to assist any individuals that need help.
- Utilize information to navigate families to mental and behavioral services. Help restoring communities and families with hope. Provide awareness to bridge the gap between addiction and recovery.
- Focus on connection. Connection with students, families, and community resources. I will ask the students for their input on presentations/programs brought to the school.
- Focus on empowering my students by providing information and awareness.

- Restart SEAGO's Housing Program, including becoming a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO).
- Try to stay with a good group. Guide people through the dark.
- Work to connect with organizations and individuals already engaging and providing services for people in our community.
- Learn more.
- Try and stop racism and help the Black community.
- Tell more people to be more open about having mental problems or use of substance. Try to find help or if help comes to you, take it.
- Strive to always consider mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness as interconnected.
- Work on being more involved with groups in my community to support services I believe are a benefit to my community.
- Commit to empathy, not judgement.
- Be more understanding and not judge so fast. I will engage with more people.
- Have a better understanding of the existing resources available in the county to better educate and connect those in need.
- Help spread awareness. Advocate. Be a voice for victims. Support.
- Focus on engaging the issues at hand. This is a world-wide problem and I feel like it has not been dealt with to the best of our abilities.
- Focus on outreach and getting the word out on the different resources that are available. Be the voice.
- Pray for those struggling. If I see someone or anyone going through something, I will reach out to them and give the help they might need. I will give them that push that they need. I will also give them some resources I learned today. Spread the word.
- Try to help as much as I can in any way I can.
- Recognize my own issues. It is okay not to be okay.
- Advocate for reducing barriers and increasing supports and resources for community members struggling with conditions of mental health, substance use, and homelessness. Programs that promote resilience. This includes returning citizens coming out of incarceration.
- Work with community leaders and peers in healthcare to help educate on Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) and Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT). There is a need and availability in our county.
- Continue to work on working with my community for my community. This is a team effort!