

Your passion.
Your Collier.

A Sobering Reality

Collier County voters stepped up to fund a centralized, expanded mental health and substance addiction facility. In collaboration with other funders, the Community Foundation of Collier County is helping to raise money to staff it and expand local services.

Submitted by the



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
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Mental Health and Addiction Ad Hoc Advisory Committee

In mid-December, Scott Burgess presented at the Collier Coalition of Healthy Minds Mental Health Workshop for the Board of Collier County Commissioners on the state of mental health and substance abuse services and needs in the community. The information shared would have been bleak in a typical year but seemed more pronounced amid a pandemic exacerbating both of these issues.

Meeting the ever-growing need for mental health and substance abuse services in Collier County has been a top priority for local leaders, nonprofits, advocates, and the Community Foundation of Collier County for the past several years. Just in the past two years, the Community Foundation has already distributed \$445,000 in competitive community program grants to 15 local organizations on these issues' frontlines. An additional \$10,000 was granted to fund Collier County's Mental Health and Addiction Services Five Year Strategic Plan. But today, the foundation is leading the charge to create a \$3 million fund targeted specifically for expanding mental health and addiction services as part of its new **Your passion. Your Collier.** capital campaign.

"Mental health is rising to the top of the problems we have in our community because of COVID-19," said Community Foundation CEO/President Eileen Connolly-Keesler. "Plenty

of issues were surrounding mental health and substance abuse before the pandemic, but it has really brought them to light quickly."

Burgess is CEO of the David Lawrence Centers for Behavioral Health (DLC)—the only receiving facility for those committed for observation and treatment under the Baker Act when they are posing a danger to themselves or others. He was also chair of the county's Mental Health and Addiction Services Strategic Plan Committee, which developed a five-year plan approved by the commissioners in December 2019. The expanded coalition continues to meet as the Collier Coalition for Healthy Minds in coordination with the Community Foundation of Collier County.

Among other daunting statistics, his updated presentation noted:

- DLC has 30 crisis treatment beds, and the facility is consistently at peak capacity. The Florida Department of Children and Family's suggested ratio is 30 adult Baker Act beds for every 100,000 population, which means more than 100 Baker Act beds are needed in Collier County.
- Baker Acts made through the Collier County Sheriff's Office rose from 1,303 in 2015 to 1,638 in 2019—a 20.45 percent increase in four years.
- The center's Crisis Stabilization Units for adults

and children were averaging ten more clients each day in September 2020 compared to September 2019, and even higher on peak days.

- Demand for services at DLC has risen 100.2 percent since 2012, outpacing the population rise of 18.9 percent during that time.
- In 2020, CCSO calls for service included 2,900 for mental illness and 4,630 for suicidal crises (total of 7,530) and 2,208 welfare checks.

Help is on the horizon, though it can't come soon enough.

Stress, uncertainty, fear, and isolation have amplified depression, anxiety, and substance abuse since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged early last year, mental health experts agree. DLC delivered almost 300,000 services in 2020—14,000 more than in 2019. Often, the cases are acute because clients were undertreated or untreated before and during the pandemic, and those who had been free of alcohol or their drug of choice fell off the wagon and returned to addiction to cope with disruptive changes in their daily lives and isolation.

Both Burgess and Collier County Sheriff Kevin Rambosk expect needs to rise dramatically when society returns to some sense of post-pandemic normalcy as vaccinations become widespread.

“We believe demand will continue to grow and grow. Nationally, there’s been a second wave of the COVID crisis—mental health and addiction that need to be attended to and are ongoing,” said Burgess. “Tucked within the pandemic, we have two epidemics: the suicide epidemic and the opioid epidemic. We were struggling significantly with these before the pandemic hit. We’re overlaying the pandemic over these epidemics.”

Though the public perception of addiction is often tied to illicit drugs, Burgess notes that alcohol—legal, affordable, and easily accessible—consistently remains the most prevalently abused drug. “Alcohol abuse has been an issue and continues to be an issue,” he said. “It runs neck-and-neck with opioids.”

The monumental shift in society during pandemic quarantine set off triggers for those struggling with sobriety as alcohol sales soared nationally, but in-person support groups abruptly ceased and then went virtual. Burgess added that addicts are “out in the community silently, just hunkered down. Over time, those folks will reach a point where it becomes a crisis, and they reach out for help. We’re probably right now just seeing the tip of the iceberg.”

Rambosk said service calls for 2020 ran about equal to 2019 statistics, which may seem like a positive sign, though it’s not. “We anticipated a significant increase in requests for mental health help through the pandemic,” he said, so the flat numbers were “kind of unique for us.” Rambosk speculates people were simply too scared or hesitant to reach out for help out of fear of catching COVID-19. His objective this year is for the CCSO to increase support for these areas of concern. “We believe we’re going to see a pretty significant need in the next six to 12 months,” he said.

New Mental Health Facility and Community Foundation Funding

When Collier County voters approved a referendum in 2018 to tack on a local one-cent surtax to the sales tax to fund and expedite sorely needed infrastructure projects, it included \$25 million to construct a new facility to increase crisis stabilization capacity and addiction treatment services. It will also function as the county’s central receiving facility for those receiving services under the Baker and Marchman Acts, whether voluntary or involuntary. (The Marchman Act is a Florida law that provides assessment, stabilization, and treatment of a person abusing alcohol or drugs who appears to be a danger to themselves or others.)

Momentum on the new facility is gaining steam, despite last year’s setbacks. In January, Jacobs Engineering was hired to study potential locations for the facility, which will incorporate community feedback before a formal selection is made. With zoning and construction, Burgess hopes the facility will be complete in 2022.

But there’s a catch: The \$25 million doesn’t cover staffing for the new facility. To help cushion the first-year operational funding gap, the Community Foundation of Collier County has included \$2 million in its new capital campaign, **Your passion. Your Collier.**, for staffing, counseling services, and a helpline. Another \$1 million earmarked for this targeted area will fund community education.

Your passion. Your Collier. was launched in the fall and designed to raise dedicated funds for six targeted areas in Collier County that need urgent attention, identified in the Community Needs and Asset Assessment and other long-term studies. **Your passion. Your Collier.** has received initial funding from the Community Foundation Board of Trustees and major donors. As of October, \$402,500 had been pledged toward mental health and

substance abuse solutions, so there’s a long way to go. “Money still needs to be raised,” Connolly-Keesler said of meeting the \$3 million goal for mental health and substance abuse.

The county will ultimately be responsible for funding the facility’s operations through its budget, state and federal grants, and its revenue. However, Connolly-Keesler said, the first milestone is raising the building. Philanthropic support for its first year would give it time to establish protocols and operations and provide the data needed in seeking outside government support. “If we can fund the first year to help with staffing, the county can go after funding after that,” she said. “The community has to fund it. We’re just a conduit for that. If they have a facility that they can’t staff 24/7, that would be a crisis.”

Burgess agreed. The sales tax fund “will build a building, and that’s wonderful. But it doesn’t do a thing to pay for the operation of the building, for more case managers, doctors, medical staff, and counselors to care for those people who come to us,” Burgess said. “I am very hopeful the community will rise up and help with the plan. We have the opportunity to take these issues to the next level. It can be game-changing for our community from a health and safety standpoint.”

Florida ranks 50th in the nation for mental health funding, and Burgess noted that Collier County can’t rely on federal or state dollars to alleviate local pressures. “I couldn’t be prouder of what we have accomplished and excited about what we hope to accomplish,” he said. “We have to rely on each other as a community to realize this vital mission.”

Stability Through Housing

Pamela Baker, Ed.D., has been involved in mental health in Florida for two decades, including as district program administrator for the state’s Substance Abuse & Mental Health Program, which operates under the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Today, she is the CEO/Executive Director of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Collier County, a local chapter of the national nonprofit that works with residents with serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Baker also served as the vice president of Collier County’s Mental Health and Addiction Services Strategic Plan Committee.

NAMI Collier provides support services



to 16,000 Collier residents annually through case management, the HUGS mental health evaluation and support program for children, and the Sarah Ann Drop-In Center, which provides hot, healthy meals, and socialization free of charge.

Many of the Sarah Ann Drop-In Center visitors are homeless due to their mental illness, Baker said. It reopened on Sept. 1 following five months of pandemic closure and is serving 25 each day at half capacity for social distancing instead of its usual 50. “It’s a good place for them to get a good meal,” she said. “It might be their only meal of the day. A lot of them don’t really cook.” On Friday, participants are sent home with a bag lunch to tide them over; many don’t have cars or use transportation to visit local food pantries. One daily visitor told her he “had been living in purgatory in his mind” and was spiraling into a deep depression while the Sarah Ann center was closed. “He’s so happy we’re here,” Baker said.

Baker said NAMI’s caseload hasn’t necessarily gone up in the past year, though “the people we are seeing need way more help. They are far more needy of our time and services; it’s not necessarily more, it’s acuity. The people we’re seeing are sicker.”

The reason? “Stress upon stress upon stress, and uncertainty, make mental illness worse. Isolation doesn’t help. People need a regular routine and that interaction at the drop-in center because of the stress of isolation.”

NAMI Collier also operates a state-funded mental health hotline (the WarmLine at 800-945-1355) that provides peer counseling for individuals with a mental illness seven days a week for the Southwest Florida region. It also continuously provides over \$30,000 in financial assistance for psychiatric evaluations and emergency prescriptions, shelter, and food for its clients. While Baker worked on the county’s strategic plan and whole-heartedly praises plans for the new central receiving facility, she is a big proponent of the committee’s second priority: affordable, supportive housing for people with serious mental illness so they can receive the wrap-around services they need to gradually get well and find employment.

“Housing is healthcare. Without good supportive housing, people will cycle in and out of hospitals and jails,” she said.

Supportive housing is strongly advocated by Burgess, too, as well as national and statewide mental health advocacy groups, including NAMI. Supportive housing can either allow the individuals to live independently or in an adult therapeutic family care setting, similar to foster children placement in safe and nurturing environments. “It’s a lovely model,” she said.

Mental Health and Addiction Services Priorities

The priorities of the Collier County Mental Health and Addiction Services Five-Year Strategic Plan (2020-2024), adopted by the board of commissioners in late 2019, are:

1. Build and operate a central receiving facility/system to serve persons experiencing an acute mental health or substance use crisis
2. Increase housing and supportive services for persons with serious mental illness and/or substance dependence
3. Establish a mental health and substance use disorder data collaborative for data sharing, collection and outcomes reporting
4. Increase the capacity and effectiveness of the justice system response for persons experiencing serious mental illness and/or substance use disorders
5. Revise and implement non-emergency Baker Act and Marchman Act transportation plans
6. Improve community prevention, advocacy, and education related to mental health and substance use disorders.

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NAMI food delivery team provides healthy meals during the pandemic

Baker said one of the biggest challenges for independent living is housing costs in Collier County. “It’s extremely unaffordable,” she said. “The people we work with are on disability,” but the monthly Social Security payments are less than \$800 a month for people who were disabled before they could enter the workforce or \$1,000 for those who had to drop out of the workforce due to their mental illness. Federal Housing and Urban Development units are set at close to \$1,000 a month, “so a person on disability cannot even afford an efficiency in Collier County,” she lamented.

Rental assistance grants and programs are inconsistent, she said, and county zoning ordinances typically state that no more than six unrelated people—and usually no more three—can live in a residential home or unit, a significant setback to building group housing. The biggest setback for any group home, she noted, is pushback from residents who profess compassion for low-income seniors and veterans or the disabled or recovering: the NIMBY mentality, “not in my back yard.”

For two years, NAMI Collier has helped clients find stable housing by working closely with local landlords. Last year, Baker’s team helped more than 30 clients find housing, including several who were chronically homeless. Baker came across a woman pushing a cart who had been on the streets for a decade, and NAMI helped her move into housing in June and land her first part-time job in years. “She’s in her mid-50s, and she can’t communicate well because paranoia and delusions get in the way,” Baker explained.

Another adult woman who lost her job due to COVID was living in her car, unable to do laundry or seek support during the pandemic lockdown. “We have engaged her in support groups and found her housing while she looks for new work,” said Baker. “Housing to me is the most important thing we can do.”

A Mosaic of Support

In communities across the nation, local jails have become the de facto landing pad for many residents struggling with mental health and



Collier County Sheriff Kevin Rambosk

substance use issues. “We don’t want that to be the case in our community,” said Rambosk. “That’s why we’re looking at a central receiving facility for intake for persons in need: So, they do not have to be transported and housed in a jail facility.”

Almost a third of inmates in the Collier County jail have a mental illness, and these inmates stay incarcerated five times longer than other inmates. However, the vast majority are not violent criminals. Every day, up to 150 inmates in the county jail receive psychiatric services.

These issues are more common than many realize: One in four in Collier County will experience a mental health challenge, and one in seven will struggle with substance use. When someone calls 9-1-1 with a mental health crisis, non-emergency cases are transferred to a hospital or DLC, Rambosk said. “Sometimes, people don’t know where to call,” he said. “We’re trying to get people the medical help they need rather than take them to jail.”

Rambosk has enacted changes in how requests are handled, implemented training programs for identifying and de-escalating mental illness crises

for law enforcement officers, and partnered with DLC to establish a mental health unit in the jail staffed with trained personnel. This program was implemented a year ago with one clinician and already expanded to two clinicians late last year. Mental health training has also been extended to fire-rescue and emergency medical services frontline personnel.

“Not all communities are doing what we’re doing. I know many are not,” Rambosk said, adding that diverting non-criminal subjects to the proper care “is the best outcome for individuals, families, and the community.”

In addition to this multi-pronged approach, Collier County has a robust judicial system to handle non-violent offenders compassionately and therapeutically. There are three treatment courts—drug, veterans, and mental health—in addition to a juvenile division. These are designed to force offenders into treatment and services that will lead them to more productive lives, keep them out of jail, and reduce the chance to become a repeat offender. These programs are voluntary and can lead to a reduction or dismissal of the defendant’s charge—an enticing incentive.

With these combined approaches and the Community Foundation’s commitment to playing a pivotal role in corraling the power of philanthropic support behind its **Your passion. Your Collier.** campaign to directly address mental health and addiction in Collier County, the community will streamline and bolster care for those who are most vulnerable.

“I’m extraordinarily proud of our county staff and commissioners, the sheriff’s office—everybody that has wanted to take a keen look at these issues, assess and analyze them, and have a plan for how we can strategically advance care around these issues,” said Burgess. “We want to encourage people in our community to walk along with us. We can’t do it without them. We are so thankful to the Community Foundation of Collier County for providing the leadership they are providing in raising awareness, and the resources, to improve needs in our community.”

Your passion. Your Collier. is Funding Targeted Community Needs

A few years ago, the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation undertook an initiative with the Community Foundation and 30 other community partners to listen and respond to our community's needs. Together, we completed a comprehensive Community Needs and Assets Assessment, which paints a clear picture of our residents' obstacles and gaps in support services.

As a direct result, the Community Foundation has launched the \$15.5 million **Your passion. Your Collier.** campaign to directly tackle six identified fields of significant concern: mental health & substance abuse, housing & hunger, education & employment, seniors & veterans, environment & accessibility, and crisis & disaster relief.

"Studies are pointless unless followed by action," said Community Foundation President/CEO Eileen Connolly-Keesler. "It's vital that both full- and part-time residents take ownership of making a difference in the community we all love."

Connolly-Keesler said the goal is to have the donations or pledges wrapped up by the end of the year. "Nothing can move forward without the community's support," she said. If the campaign drags out beyond a year, "it won't be beneficial to the community."



Follow your passion!

Contact us for more information
Eileen Connolly-Keesler
President/CEO
ekeesler@cfcollier.org

Julie Howe Van Tongeren
VP of Development
jvantongeren@cfcollier.org

Call us at 239.649.5000 or visit
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The Community Foundation: 35 Years of Connecting Passion With Purpose

The Community Foundation of Collier County is THE catalyst for change for nonprofit collaboration. For the past 35 years, we have been connecting people to causes that matter, growing their charitable legacies, and funding nonprofit organizations to improve the quality of life in Collier County, distributing over \$35 million in grants and scholarships by the end of our 2020 fiscal year.

We hold more than \$250 million in assets and have distributed nearly \$200 million in grants to nonprofit organizations and community programs since 1985. Find out how the Community Foundation assesses the pulse of the social services in Collier County each year with its "Vital Signs" report, provides a comprehensive nonprofit directory, and convenes passionate financial advisors, donors and much more at cfcollier.org.



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1110 Pine Ridge Road, Ste. 200 | Naples, FL 34108
239-649-5000 | cfcollier.org

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