

COUNTRY ROADS

Highlighting Champions
of Rural West Virginia





On the road to a healthier West Virginia

The State Office of Rural Health works to ensure equitable healthcare access through:

- Leveraging federal funds to improve access to healthcare services
- Supporting workforce recruitment and retention including loan repayment and J-1 Visa waivers
- Promoting community engagement
- Providing technical assistance to public and non-profit groups

Partnerships, Service and Quality



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STORIES BY JEAN HARDIMAN
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Porch Talk Logo by Jennifer Lewis

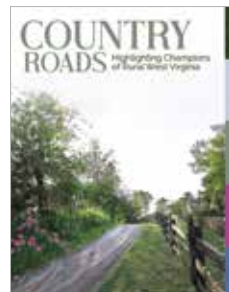


with **Rich Sutphin, MPH**
Executive Director, West Virginia Rural Health Association

Welcome to another edition of Country Roads. As always, this magazine highlights and showcases the work of rural leaders and champions from throughout our great state.

West Virginia is a land of stories. From the first settlers who crossed the Allegheny Mountains to the brave men and women who worked to gain our statehood during a period of serious division in the nation, our hills and hollows are filled with beautiful stories. For too long, the story presented to the outside has been one of generational poverty, poor health, and low educational attainment. This edition helps to continue the journey of reframing our story to bring better understanding of our state, our culture, and the folks who live here.

As we “visit” with some of the folks doing meaningful work to positively impact their community, remember that each of their stories is the story of West Virginia and the folks that live here.



ON THE COVER
Evans, WV

Photography courtesy of Chris Gosses

WELCOME



Giving 'everything we've got'

Heather Robinson and Brent Tomblin

Brighter Futures is a multifaceted approach to fight substance use disorder

Story by Jean Hardiman

Per capita, Boone County is about as close to the opioid epidemic's ground zero as a county can get, said Brent Tomblin, executive director of Boone Memorial Health's Brighter Futures, the hospital's multifaceted substance abuse and behavioral health treatment program.

The program contends with several challenges, he said. It must fight the stigma that continues to make it difficult for people to seek treatment. There is not a one-size-fits-all treatment for substance use disorder and relapse is often part of the process, which makes it very challenging for the healthcare professionals who give their all.

Despite these challenges, Brighter Futures was launched at Boone Memorial Health to provide medication assisted treatment, counseling, transportation assistance, and more.



The Boone Memorial Health Mobile Unit offers anonymity that a brick-and-mortar facility cannot. Pictured from left are Crystal Gillispie, nurse practitioner; Dana Sprouse, mobile unit driver; Chastity Dotson, medical assistant; Kevin Gilliam, transport van driver; James Frame, licensed professional counselor; and Brent Tomblin, Executive Director of Growth and Brighter Futures.

"I'm not saying we're perfect, but we do give everything we've got to try to help these folks," said Tomblin, who has a master's degree in healthcare administration and was managing rural health clinics when he was asked to lead the Brighter Futures program when it opened in 2020. "That's why we take a holistic approach and don't just treat the addiction. We try to treat the lifestyle, their home life, because if you send somebody back home that lives under a bridge or you have somebody that lives with other folks who are doing drugs, chances of relapse are extremely high. But if you don't try to be proactive and go out there and fix it, what's going to happen? It's hard to find a solution, but you can't just let people die."

It's a journey with a lot of learning along the way and that lingering fear of running out of funding, but with a lot of help from the state Department of Human Services and other community supports – like the Boone County Quick Response Team – Brighter Futures is helping one community member at a time.

It started with the State Opioid Response Grant from the Bureau for Behavioral Health at the Department of Human Services.

"They funded us and have continued to fund us up to this point," Tomblin said. "They've been a great partner – really working with us and taking more feedback and helping provide us with funding or tools or whatever we need."

“ We do give everything we've got to try to help these folks.

– Brent Tomblin



Brent Tomblin is executive director of Boone Memorial Health's Brighter Futures, which provides assisted treatment and counseling.



Heather Robinson, a certified physician assistant, says if a patient is not addressing underlying issues, medication is only a band-aid.

Medication assisted treatment with lifestyle supports

Brighter Futures has a physician to provide medication to patients, a nurse practitioner, a physician assistant, a licensed professional counselor, and two master's-level counselors.

"Not only did we want to focus on the patient's addiction itself, but we wanted to take a holistic approach to the patient's life and their care in general," Tomblin said. "We want to focus on the social determinants of health in our area that our patients have issues with. We're focusing on food and clothing. We want to make sure that they have access to transportation, which is a huge issue for us. And we want to make sure that they have a driver's license. We want to help them pay off their fines."

They also help patients further their education. "If they've dropped out of school or want to pursue a different career, if they want to get into college or get their GED, we help them," he said. "And then we help them get back into the workforce."

Mental health services

While medication can be an important part of the recovery process, therapy is essential, said Heather Robinson, a certified physician assistant who works with Brighter Futures.

"I believe that medication is a great support to a holistic approach to the client, but the medication is only a 'band-aid' if the patient is not addressing the underlying issues, and there are always underlying issues," Robinson said. "Whether the patient has poor coping skills, past trauma, broken family bonds, or is in a current abusive situation, the work of recovery occurs in cognitive behavior therapy sessions with their therapist."

"Medication does not teach them to make better decisions. Medication does not teach them their worth and value. Medication does not help them heal emotional or physical trauma," she continued. "But therapy, when performed correctly, has the power to help willing patients change and begin to function in a community environment."

Robinson said she is fortunate to work with some amazing therapists who are fantastic at individualizing patient needs.

"They work one-on-one with our patients to heal, but also help them establish a better environment for their recovery, re-establish family bonds, connect them to resources and to get them back in the workforce. My success as a provider would be minimal in the recovery population without the services of my therapy team. I believe this holistic approach is the best care plan for our patients' success."



Medical assistant Chastity Dotson checks a patient's blood pressure while on the mobile unit.

Brighter Futures has transitioned from mostly office-based, medication-assisted treatment to being a licensed behavioral health center. Providers still prescribe medications, but the program has expanded the amount of therapy services provided.

"Instead of just addiction treatment, you're able to get into family therapies and marriage counseling, trauma and PTSD – all the other different kinds of therapies you can provide," Tomblin said. "A lot of mental health issues go hand-in-hand with addiction. We knew that we wanted to expand to be able to help as many folks as possible."

Mobile office services

Boone County has no Uber, no taxi service, no consistent bus service. Getting places, particularly for those who have lost their vehicles or had their licenses revoked, is a tremendous challenge, Tomblin said.

"We don't have anything like larger counties do, so we were trying to think outside of the box," he said. "With another State Opioid Response Grant from the Bureau for Behavioral Health, we were able to purchase a 36-foot mobile unit to provide these services in the underserved communities."

“ I believe this holistic approach is the best care plan for our patients' success.

– Heather Robinson

The mobile unit has a full-time provider, full-time counselor, medical assistant, and a driver, Tomblin said, adding that it also helps with the stigma problem because not everyone wants to be seen going into a brick-and-mortar facility.

Hepatology clinic

In a partnership with WVU Medicine, Brighter Futures has started a clinic where providers develop treatment plans for patients with Hepatitis C.

"If other programs jump on this and more providers start taking on Hepatitis patients, we'll be able to completely eliminate Hepatitis C," Tomblin said.



Transportation, particularly for those who have lost their vehicles or had their licenses revoked, is a tremendous challenge in Boone County. Tomblin said a mobile unit offers a solution.

Peer recovery coaches

For the past three years, the emergency department at Boone Memorial Health has employed certified peer recovery coaches who have recovered from substance use disorder themselves.

“Whenever a patient comes into the ER that is an overdose victim or somebody that’s considered high-risk, a peer recovery coach is able to go into the room with the patient and talk to them about recovery resources and to help get them into treatment facilities,” Tomblin said. “The nurses and doctors rely on the coaches and their expertise. Patients can feel stigmatized. They are scared to open up about what’s really going on because they’re scared somebody’s going to call the police, or they’re afraid of how people are going to react.

“A peer recovery coach can say, ‘I very much know how you’re feeling at this point because I’ve also lived that same life and I’ve escaped that. I’ve recovered. And now that’s why I’m here to help you.’”

A team effort

Tomblin said the Bureau for Behavioral Health has been a strong partner in the program, as well as the leadership at Boone Memorial Health.

“We wouldn’t have been able to make this possible without our leadership at the hospital, who really wanted to make a difference in the community,” he said.

He also credited the Boone County Quick Response Team for its help. The team has representatives from law enforcement, EMS, and peer recovery coaches.

“Anytime there’s an overdose or a high-risk person in the community, the Quick Response Team will actually go to their house, check on them, provide resources, and connect them to treatment,” he said. “The team is the first step or the outreach arm of our program, even though they’re not employed by us. Without their support, I don’t think that we would be where we are now.”

What else would Tomblin like to see happen?

He’d like to see better transportation services in rural communities. He’d also like to see increased Medicaid reimbursements.



Brighter Futures has transitioned from mostly office-based, medication-assisted treatment to being a licensed behavioral health center. Providers still prescribe medications, but the program has expanded the amount of therapy services provided.

“ We need some help battling stigma and providing education on medication, on what counseling does ... the steps of treatment, and success rates ... I think whenever people are properly educated, their minds generally change.

– Brent Tomblin

“In most of these programs, you’re seeing very high levels of Medicaid patients. ... We operate a lot on grant funds and the state has really fueled our operations. If we don’t have grant funds to be able to continue this treatment, strictly trying to operate under Medicaid reimbursement is a challenge.”

He’d also like to see more campaigns to battle the stigma surrounding mental health issues and substance use disorder.

“We need some help battling the stigma and providing education on medication, on what counseling does, on what the steps of treatment are, and on success rates and things like that,” Tomblin said. “I think whenever people are properly educated, their minds generally change.

“People don’t truly understand how addiction affects your body and how difficult it is to get rid of that addictive behavior,” he said.

That’s why this program was initiated.

“We just saw this continuing to grow,” he said. “We saw emergency departments constantly filling up with patients who wanted some sort of pain medication or other addictive kind of drug. There was no real treatment in our area to send people to.

“So, we took a proactive approach and started our own facility. It was definitely a learning curve, but it’s definitely very rewarding.”



Handle with care | Angie Gray

Story by Jean Hardiman

Longtime nurse believes meeting people where they are and better tracking their health needs are both crucial in battling the opioid crisis

Meet people where they are. Stay organized throughout their screenings and treatment to keep track of their needs. Collaborate with other organizations. Don't judge – just offer help wherever and whenever you can. Make it easier to get started on the right path.

These are some of the many lessons that registered nurse Angie Gray has learned over 30 years in nursing and which she has put into action as she

and her Addiction Services team at WWU Medicine Berkeley Medical Center have implemented new programs to treat patients in active addiction and guide them toward and through recovery.

“We won't stop substance use disorder, but we can get out of epidemic proportions, and the way we approach it is what the difference will be,” said Gray, who spent 15 years of her nursing career working in public health.



As part of harm reduction, nurse Angie Gray educates patients about Narcan to reverse overdoses.

With new hospital initiatives to bring users into the fold and track their needs, with harm reduction programs that meet people where they are, and with community-wide collaboration, she's fighting for her home state, which she believes is still battling the effects of an industry that exploited the state to build its wealth and then left victims to fend for themselves.

"West Virginia was targeted for this," she said. "It was a perfect storm – poverty, lower education and more blue-collar injuries, and all our fail-safes failed us.

Recovery friendly

At Berkeley Medical Center, they start by making sure there are peers available to help those who find themselves in the emergency room. People with lived experience who have been through a long-term recovery and are trained as peer recovery coaches are part of the Emergency Department staff, Gray said. They initiate interaction with patients who come in for substance use disorder.

"It's just very different than somebody from healthcare in a uniform approaching somebody," she said. "I can empathize with what withdrawal from opioids is like, but I don't know what that actually feels like, but somebody who has been through it does. It just changes the conversation and really helps that patient become part of having a voice and becoming part of the whole care team."

The Emergency Department has implemented the Bridge to Recovery program, which facilitates medication-assisted treatment with Suboxone. It's not only helped those who end up in the Emergency Department, but it's helped bring people forward for care, she said.

"Once people know that you're recovery-friendly, they just start coming and walk in and say, 'I need help, and I heard you're recovery friendly,'" Gray said, adding that if someone doesn't have an outpatient appointment for follow-up with medicines for opioid use disorder, her team will help get them one.

"Once we have that appointment date, it could be two weeks to 30 days out," she said. "We could lose people at that time. We don't want them to continue using the deadly fentanyl that's in our community, so our doctors will bridge them and give them a prescription to start or continue Suboxone until their appointment time with that outpatient provider. If they come in with withdrawal, we'll go ahead and give them a dose here, outside of that prescription to help manage the withdrawal."

Every provider in the Emergency Department "will initiate and prescribe into the Bridge program, which is amazing," she said.

Project Engage

On the inpatient floors, they launched Project Engage, in which Gray, as the supervisor, and her director



work with a hospitalist, case managers, and nurses to identify patients who may be at the hospital for other reasons but also have substance use disorder, including alcoholism.

“And then we meet with them and see if they want resources or want treatments, whether that is initiating on Suboxone or going off-site to a detox center,” she said. “We could do inpatient referrals as well or outpatient IOP, which is an intensive outpatient therapy. That works and seems to be very successful for alcohol as well.”

Standardizing processes

Berkeley Medical Center has also undergone an effort to standardize the process of getting labs and screenings so that it’s easier to track. Previously, labs were ordered sporadically by different offices and departments providing treatment that all had different ways of doing things.

“So then I just standardized it here, and worked with our chief medical officer of the ED and just presented the case and then built in APTs, which are advanced triage protocols,” she said. A nurse is stationed where patients come in to register them and order and track a standard set of screenings and whatever else is needed.

“We’ve added syphilis to that screening . . . and have already identified several cases and been able to treat,” she said. “This is huge in bringing all healthcare together working on the epidemic, because people

“**When you make the services available and offer care without judgment, people will come to you, and you can make a difference.**

– Angie Gray

with substance use disorder, you see in every area of healthcare. They’re accessing healthcare in different ways. So it’s a good way to identify and offer resources, and it really just changes everything.”

There is other important work needed as well, which Gray embarked on prior to coming to Berkeley Medical Center.

“My previous background was 15 years in local public health, and I saw this opioid epidemic unfold in front of my eyes at the local level,” said Gray, formerly the nursing director for the Berkeley-Morgan County Board of Health. “I saw people early on coming into clinics who were injecting and literally begging for help. And there was nothing I could do. I could test them for HIV and hepatitis, give them some compassion, and send



Gray, along with the team at WVU Medicine Berkeley Medical Center, has implemented new programs to treat patients in active addiction and guide them toward and through recovery.

them out the door. It was before the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid expansion, and if you didn't have \$100,000, you weren't going to be able to go anywhere for treatment."

Gray decided that she could not sit back and do nothing, so she started researching ways to intervene. She decided to pursue a harm reduction program that provided access to clean syringes and supplies. It doesn't stop drug use, but it stops some of the dangerous consequences related to injecting drugs with unclean supplies.

"I then worked the next three years laying that out in the community and getting buy-in and that kind of thing and was able to launch that program at the health department in April of 2017," she said. "Before the state had guidelines or any funding, the administrator said, 'Now you've proven that we need the program. If you can find the money, then you can open it.' In one month, I raised \$72,000 to get the program up and running."

Harm reduction strategies meet people where they are

Harm reduction work is about meeting people where they are, without judgment, Gray said.

"People want to intervene before people get on substances, and people want help whenever they're ready to get off. But in the middle of active, chaotic addiction and use, nobody wants to touch that,"



More than 500 Narcan kits a month are given out to those who want to have it on hand.

Gray said. "Harm reduction is where you can actually connect with people and help them. I always said my job was just to help people be as healthy as possible during active addiction so when they got to recovery, they weren't left with infections and disease and health issues. Providing clean supplies and meals and teaching people how to inject safely reduces the spread of HIV, hepatitis, and syphilis, which is on the rise."

Other harm reduction strategies include providing Narcan to reverse overdoses, making appointments for treatment programs or opportunities to speak with a peer recovery specialist, and working on



Berkeley County has seen a 25% decrease in overdose deaths, which Gray attributes to collaboration and working together as a community.



“Treat people with respect like any other patient. West Virginia didn’t just wake up and want to put a needle in its arm.”

small goals. Berkeley Medical Center and the WVU Crisis Stabilization and Recovery Center have given out 500 Narcan kits per month to anyone wanting to have it on hand. That’s up from just giving out 11 kits per month. “It’s reducing harm wherever you can, and when you do that population-wide, that has a big impact on the community.” Gray said.

Collaboration with the community

The new programs at Berkeley Medical Center and organizations in the region are trying to collaborate on a larger scale. The We CARE Tri-County Coalition, involving Morgan, Berkeley, and Jefferson counties, meets monthly and has representatives from law enforcement, emergency services, schools, healthcare, and others.

“It’s really the whole community connection and all of our collaboration that will bring us down out of epidemic proportions,” Gray said. “Last year, we started a Tri-State Collaborative between Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland because in the Panhandle it’s a short drive to any of the three states, and all of our people go back and forth. We eat, sleep, live, pray, and play in all three of those states, because our communities are so connected and similar. So we thought we could start collaborating across the state lines to better serve our patients, our communities, and share resources and programs and stuff that works.”



To schedule a Bridge to Recovery appointment, or for questions about Addictions Services, call 304-264-1000 ext. 38081.

There is also a statewide coalition, the West Virginia Hope in Action Alliance (www.wvhopeinaction.org), through which 180 members share resources. Gray is currently the chairwoman of the alliance.

Berkeley County has seen a 25% decrease in overdose deaths, which she attributes to collaboration “and really all working together as a community, knowing where all the resources are, and how to tackle the gaps,” Gray said.

When you make the services available and offer care without judgment, people will come to you, and you can make a difference, she said.

“Treat people with respect like any other patient,” Gray said. “West Virginia didn’t just wake up and want to put a needle in its arm.”



Working in tandem

Greg Ingram and Anne Cavalier

Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Smithers & Montgomery pursues a range of healthy solutions for two sister cities



Story by Jean Hardiman

When Anne Cavalier thinks about health, she thinks about more than physical well-being. She thinks big.

“When I say healthcare, I don’t just mean your physical health. I mean your mental health, your emotional health, your social health, and your financial health,” said Cavalier, mayor of Smithers, West Virginia.

“And I believe that a healthier population is a more successful population, and a more healthy and successful population can help you rebuild an area where its economy needs to be rebuilt.”

That’s the mission behind Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Smithers & Montgomery, which falls under the umbrella of the Center for Rural Health Development’s Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia program and is a partnership between the two sister communities southeast of Charleston that sit across the Kanawha River from each other.

The organization aims to provide options for healthy living as well as developing tourism in the area to boost the local economy.

Finding ways to rebuild

The Smithers and Montgomery area was hit with an economic downturn beginning in 2017, when West Virginia University Institute of Technology (WVU Tech), which provided about 300 jobs, left the community, and relocated to Beckley. It was followed by the closing of the high school, taking more jobs, and then the loss of a local Kroger grocery store and other businesses, Cavalier said.

“WVU did an economic impact study that showed that (the closing of WVU Tech) actually did \$15.2 million a year negative impact to the area,” Cavalier said.

Cavalier and Montgomery Mayor Greg Ingram had worked together before, she said. They decided to team up and find solutions.

“**... A healthier population is a more successful population, and a more healthy and successful population can help you rebuild an area where its economy needs to be rebuilt.**

— Anne Cavalier, Smithers Mayor

“We weren’t going to say, ‘woe is me.’ We weren’t going to cry in our beer. We were going to find ways to rebuild the area,” Cavalier said.

“We have to pick up that ball somehow and try to carry on and keep people healthy,” Ingram said.

They got some help from organizations such as Virginia Tech and the Environmental Protection Agency’s Healthy Places for Healthy People initiative, which studied the area and made recommendations. “They all came up with the same recommendations,” Cavalier

said, to capitalize on the natural beauty of the area when rebuilding the economy.

Geographically, Smithers and Montgomery are halfway between the Capitol Dome in Charleston and the New River Gorge Bridge in Fayetteville.

“We sit on the Kanawha River. The Midland Trail goes through Smithers, and in December of 2020, the New River Gorge National Park was designated. So that gave us even more reasons to look at ourselves as an outdoor recreation destination,” Cavalier said.

She had already gotten some insight into finding ways to benefit from tourists passing through the area on their way to other places. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) invited Cavalier to participate in a program called Gateway Cities.

“In 2017 before all this started, believe it or not, the ARC had invited me to participate in a program called Gateway Cities,” Cavalier said. “Gateway cities are not destinations. They are cities along the way to a destination that can take advantage of the tourists passing through their area. So we had focused on that early on.

“We started taking a really in-depth look at ourselves,” Cavalier said. “Who would we need to be? What assets would we need to have if we were going to make this major transition from a coal economy... and the loss of a college?”

The leaders of the two towns quickly determined their best assets were their people and that to rebuild the economy, they needed to help them thrive. The two communities were invited by Sharon Lansdale, who at the time was president and CEO of the Center for Rural Health Development, to be part of the Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia program. They brought partners together representing the two municipalities, the healthcare field, the business community, and others to get to work. Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Smithers & Montgomery also has a part-time director, Jimmy Bennett “who carries the banner and helps us get stuff done,” Cavalier said.

Bennett collects research and tracks data that is important in applying for program funding, she said. Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Smithers & Montgomery

does not fund all the health-related programs that are in the works in the two cities, Cavalier said, but it does support Bennett's role of researching programs that would be beneficial and organizing the data needed for successful grant applications.

Places to get moving

There are several projects that have either started or are in the planning stages in the two communities. Both towns have needed more places to exercise for quite some time, Ingram said, adding that there are walking trails, but more trails are needed and planned.

Montgomery cut the ribbon on a new park in the spring and has torn down a city block to build the Montgomery Events Center, Ingram said. The indoor-outdoor venue will have a stage and be a place to hold dance recitals and other types of performances.

“ If you're swimming, you're exercising. If you're on the water and you're enjoying the river, I mean that's stress relief to me.

– Greg Ingram, Montgomery Mayor

“We plan to have ice skating there in the winter, so we're just trying to build things to get people out of the house and try to get people healthy,” he said.

Montgomery also has plans for a marina that will also be a great place for promoting wellness, Ingram said.

“If you're swimming, you're exercising,” he said. “If you're on the water and you're out enjoying the river, I mean, that's stress relief to me.”

Smithers now has the Smithers Gateway Center with a host of options for community wellness. In 2019, the Fayette County Board of Education donated the former elementary school property – about 32,000

square feet – to Smithers to house city hall.

“We only needed 6,000 square feet for the city, so I went looking for tenants,” Cavalier said.

“Inside the Gateway Center we have New River Health Clinic that has medical, dental, and behavioral healthcare and a pharmacy. We have the Starting Points Daycare Center that has daycare and after-school care, and the Fayette County Family Resource Network.”

There is also a senior center in the building with 30 to 40 daily participants.

Senior center participants “not only engage in a nutrition program with lunch provided but also do exercise programs and programs in the arts,” Cavalier said. “They've put on plays. They've gone from sitting and eating lunch to coming there looking forward to three or four hours of eating and activity and socializing.”

The center also includes a community garden, run by Noel Mitchell, a health educator with WVU Extension Service, who educates people of all ages about the benefits of fresh vegetables and fruits.

“I don't know of any activity outside of gardening that is a way to get exercise, mitigate food insecurities, build self-confidence, and is good for the planet all wrapped into one,” Mitchell said.

To address financial health, the center hosts job fairs, and to address social health, it hosts daily activities and different types of concerts and performances, “everything from Shakespeare to country to rock 'n' roll,” Cavalier said.

Ball field renovation

A coal company gave Smithers property that had abandoned, vandalized ball fields on it. When the area was hit by devastating floods in 2022, and the community's working ball fields were destroyed, families and coaches approached the city to see if they could help get the abandoned ball fields in shape so there was a place for kids to play.



Entrance to Smithers City Hall, which is also home to the Gateway Center, New River Health Clinic, Starting Points Daycare Center, the Fayette County Family Resource Network, and a senior center.

They were willing to donate the money and the labor.

“Keeping those kids active outdoors was part of the mission of our Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Smithers & Montgomery,” Cavalier said. With the help of city funds, business donations, and Fayette County Board of Education contributions, the organization teamed up with city employees and other volunteers and got the ball fields ready, and they’ve stayed busy since.



The mayors of Smithers and Montgomery teamed up to find solutions to help their area rebound economically from the closing of WVU Tech.

“The mission of Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Smithers & Montgomery is to look at every single aspect of what it means to be healthy, whether you’re a six-month-old in the daycare center during the day while your parents work or you’re a middle school person who wants to play sports or you’re a senior citizen who wants to come out and socialize and not just sit at home by themselves. We have tried to look at the whole aspect of what a healthy life means, and I really credit Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia for allowing us the funding.”

Harm reduction and nutrition education

The Fayette County Health Department offers a harm reduction program in the community on Thursdays, which includes HIV and hepatitis testing, screenings, and hygiene supplies for those in need. Health department professionals also provide information and resources for those seeking treatment for substance use or other healthcare needs.

“It’s so much more than (offering clean supplies for those with substance use disorder),” Cavalier said. “There’s nutrition education and, if someone needs it, even clothing and referral for utility assistance, assistance in finding housing.”



Mayor of Montgomery Greg Ingram applauds the mission behind Wild, Wonderful & Healthy Smithers & Montgomery, which falls under the umbrella of the Center for Rural Health Development's Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia program and is a partnership between the two sister communities.

On the horizon

Earlier this year, architects and engineers designed Oakland Riverfront Park, which will be a public park in Smithers on the Kanawha River. It will feature a playground, picnic tables, public restrooms, and a river launch where the public can launch kayaks, canoes, and paddle boards into the river. There has been no public access point to the river before in Smithers, Cavalier said. There will be plug-in areas for food trucks as well. The completion date is not yet set, but Cavalier hopes construction will begin by late 2024.

Another future project involves the Mammoth Preserve, which is 5,500 acres on the mountaintop above Smithers that is managed by the West Virginia Land Trust and where pedestrian, bicycle, and equestrian trails are being built, Cavalier said. The property that was donated by a coal company will soon house the Mammoth Preserve Welcome Center, which will serve as the southern entrance.

Federal grant funding will go toward the welcome center and toward the purchase of almost 26 acres inside Smithers that was once a coal camp. Known as Longacre, the property is bordered on one side by the Kanawha River and by the Midland Trail (U.S. 60) on the other.

Grant funding will help with site preparation, including roads, water, and sewer lines, Cavalier said. "The plan is to attract a hotel or motel and build the site as an outdoor destination point," she said. Official development plans have not been made, but Cavalier said the goal is for there to be lodging of some kind.

"I just really appreciate all of the outside help of the organizations that have stepped up. These are passionate people, or they wouldn't be spending their time in our own towns," Ingram said. "Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia has just been unbelievable with what they've brought to the table and what they've done to help us."

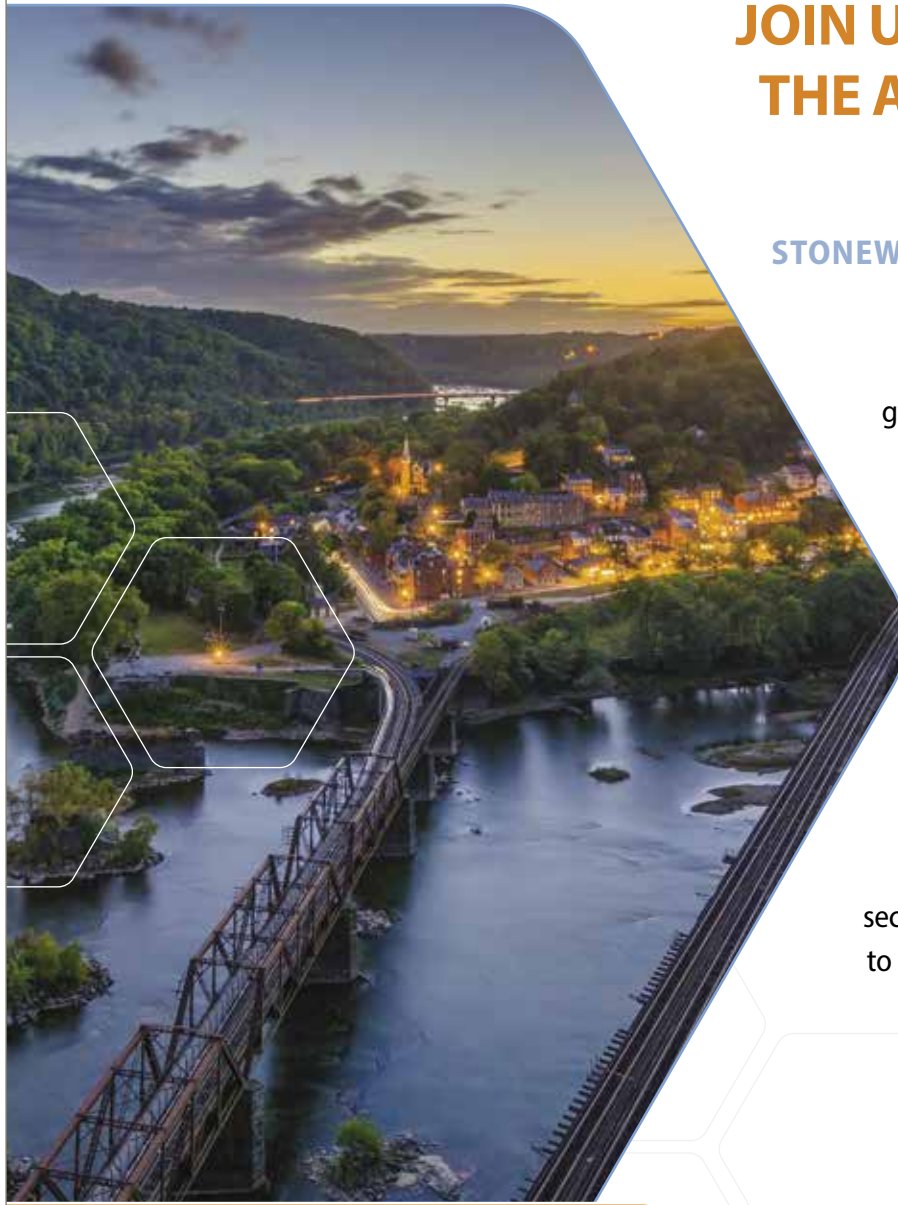
Strengthening Prosperity and Community Throughout Appalachia

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Career-ready

Tammy Myers

MedEd program helps high school students jump-start their healthcare careers

Story by Jean Hardiman

The need for healthcare workers in the Mountain State is great, and so is the need for affordable training for students.

A new program in Jefferson and Monongalia counties aims to help address these challenges simultaneously. It's called MedEd, and it is an opportunity for students to get a jump-start on careers in the medical field while they're still attending high school, said Ian Hillman, director of Responsive Education for Jefferson County Schools.

The free program launched in 2023 and is available to high school juniors and seniors. It provides a pathway to a career as a medical laboratory assistant, medical assistant, or radiology technician in Jefferson County or as an ambulatory care assistant or sterile processing technician in Monongalia County.

Funded through Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) program, MedEd is



MedEd, a new program in Jefferson and Monongalia counties, aims to help address challenges and is an opportunity for students to get a jump-start on careers in the medical field while they're still attending high school. Pictured from left are Tammy Myers, Zenia Baker, Grace Ott and Andrea Peraza Rivera.

overseen by the Education Alliance, which has a vision of ensuring that all students in West Virginia's public schools graduate ready to begin a career or pursue further education and training. The partnership also includes WVU Medicine, Blue Ridge Career and Technical College in Jefferson County, as well as Jefferson County Schools and Monongalia County Schools.

"These are all experiences they otherwise would not receive until they began their career," Hillman said. Upon graduation, they are encouraged to finish their associate degree at Blue Ridge Career and Technical College and would be eligible for tuition assistance from WVU Medicine. "The goals are to give students access to hands-on training, paid internships, and an industry-driven curriculum in healthcare."

The MedEd program in Monongalia County is offered under the same premise, but has some differences in programming, Hillman said.

"MedEd is part of the Education Alliance's CAREERS Initiative, which aims to equip underserved students with hands-on skills to acquire a job right out of high school," Hillman said. "This initiative is predominantly the innovation of the Education Alliance, which

partnered with WVU Medicine and schools in Jefferson County and Monongalia County to create this program."

The Education Alliance received ARC funding in June 2023 to implement MedEd, which is multifaceted and offers benefits to many stakeholders, he said.

"First, it offers students an opportunity in healthcare they may not otherwise have and provides hands-on training and opportunities that are a direct benefit to the students and their future careers," Hillman said. "Second, it offers the West Virginia University Health System future employees that will have undergone two years of training and will be ready to start their career upon high school graduation. Finally, this creates a pipeline to better fill employment gaps and better serve our rural communities throughout the Mountain State."

He encourages West Virginians to spread the word about this program through conversation and through using #GetCAREERS on social media, with hopes that businesses in the state can replicate this type of program not only in healthcare, but in other areas through the school systems' Career and Technical Education programs and work-based learning opportunities.

The 4T Academy is a manufacturing arm of the Education Alliance's CAREERS Initiative, partnering with Toyota. These partnerships between industry organizations and school systems benefit the students, the organizations, and the economy, he said.

"The MedEd program can serve as a model to highlight partnerships between diverse high school students and thriving businesses in our state," he said. Both Jefferson County and Monongalia County schools, through the guidance of the Education Alliance, have instituted a program that not only helps our students, but our industry, communities, and state.

"This program can take students who may not have a feasible way to receive post-secondary training or the wherewithal to seek employment and gives them the skills to change the trajectory of their lives. The program gives students the opportunity to speak in front of classmates and take on leadership opportunities that really help their self-confidence and give them 21st century skills."

For more information, visit wvmedicine.org/info/meded/.

Jefferson County students receive:

- Credit towards an associate degree at no cost including 25 credit hours for the medical assistant track or 24 credit hours for the medical lab assistant track
- Access to a trained instructor
- Access to lab and medical equipment with built-in, hands-on experiences as they complete rotations at Jefferson Medical Center and affiliated offices
- A paid internship their senior year



MedEd offers students an opportunity in healthcare they may not otherwise have and provides hands-on training and opportunities that are a direct benefit to the students and their future careers. Instructor Tammy Myers with students Andrea Peraza Rivera and Grace Ott.



Empowering others

Dr. Chiquita Howard-Bostic and Jamila Jones

Leader helps community members find solutions

Story by Jean Hardiman

Public information. It's out there, but it's hard to find sometimes, especially when you need it most.

"You may say, 'just Google it,'" said Jamila Jones, founder of Innovative Community Solutions, based in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle. "However, the truth is circuitous to find at best and almost impossible to find when you are stressed and dealing with a crisis or just life in real time."

She founded Innovative Community Solutions, or ICS, in 2012 to help empower her neighbors to find answers and solutions to their biggest needs. ICS is a community-based organization committed to economic development achieved by addressing the social determinants of health. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources defines the social determinants of health as the conditions in the environments where people live that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.

The social determinants of health focus on five domains: economic stability, education access and quality, healthcare access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context.

As its executive director, Jones works to improve health outcomes for people in the Eastern Panhandle. This means everything from physical exercise to addressing hunger to fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening civic engagement. Achieving all of these goals requires insights from the people who are affected, she said.

“The solutions proposed must incorporate the views of community members,” Jones said. “There is a need to foster community-centered collaboration within and outside of government to ensure an equitable, thriving future.”

“ There is a need to foster community-centered collaboration within and outside of government to ensure an equitable, thriving future.

– Jamila Jones

Here’s a look at the focus areas that Jones’ organization has begun to tackle.

Health and Wellness Initiative

If there is one resource that West Virginians have in abundance it’s the beauty of the outdoors, and Jones is hoping to help her community members get out into it.

Social Determinants of Health



-  Economic stability
-  Education access and quality
-  Healthcare access and quality
-  Neighborhood and built environment
-  Social and community context

Healthy People 2030, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

“We are hosting walks and hikes at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, encouraging the community to get energized, socialize, and get fit while focusing on self-care,” she said.

Her group has offered beginner-friendly walks and a moderately challenging hike with experienced Appalachian Trail hiker Derek Lugo. The hikes include lunch and yoga to wind down.



Encouraging community health, Jamila Jones hosts walks and hikes at Harpers Ferry National Park. Jones is pictured with hiker Caitlin McAteer.



Along with getting outdoors, Jones encourages exercises including Latin-inspired dance workout Zumba.

"I am very excited about this series of getting together outdoors," she said, adding that along with Lugo, partners of the project include local Zumba groups, who get exercise through a Latin-inspired dance workout; Harpers Ferry National Park rangers; the League of Women Voters; and Dr. Mark Cucuzzella, a physician with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Martinsburg who allowed ICS to print and distribute his low-carb/keto recipe book.

As part of the outdoor focus, Jones is working on a project to restore a historically significant home in Harpers Ferry, the Weaver-Gillison House, which could provide a cultural heritage site for families

visiting the park or hiking the Appalachian Trail. The house would provide "an opportunity to learn about the contributions and lives of African Americans in Harpers Ferry and throughout Appalachia," she said.

Basic needs for health and safety

The Jefferson County African American Community Association's Willing Workers, a group that hosts a monthly event to feed unhoused citizens, has grown significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Jones' organization works in collaboration with that effort along with organizing



Jamila Jones meets with NAACP leaders during committee fundraising at Fishermen's Hall, a church built for African Americans. They renovated that church and are creating a neighborhood community space.

community talks to address mental health concerns and encourage compassion and empathy as the community coped with the effects of the pandemic.

"We partnered with Dr. Chiquita Howard-Bostic, vice president of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging at Shepherd University, for diversity seminars aimed at specific groups," Jones said.

Howard-Bostic led a series of discussions on diversity, equity and inclusion, including one for interfaith communities and others for at-risk youth and high school counselors in Berkeley County and Jefferson County public schools, Jones added.

"We also partnered with the Jefferson County NAACP to sponsor the NAACP Youth Block Party, where we recruited youth-serving nonprofit organizations to distribute information to the community," she said. "Young people were given backpacks filled with school supplies, along with pizza and sweet treats. There also were fun activities, from the Air National Guard's rock-climbing wall to a cool mobile trailer with Xbox consoles to play video games.

“ The key to responding to a crisis is in the preparation, and we build our knowledge bank by gathering assets to try to respond effectively and equitably.

– Jamila Jones

"These items were free of charge, thanks to grants and donations, but we believe that is the best way to serve the underserved community because they need these resources and information the most," Jones said.

Belonging and civic muscle

Jones believes that one way to foster belonging is by hearing all sides of a concern in the community.



"ICS tries to have a wide-angle lens by participating in organizations to hear their goals and challenges and by providing any relevant perspective and advice," she said. "There are often many opportunities to work together once we find common ground."

Jones has found that sharing information with civic groups and churches increases a sense of community belonging and leverages programs and resources offered by local government.

"The key to responding to a crisis is in the preparation, and we build our knowledge bank by gathering assets to try to respond effectively and equitably," she said. "Often, ICS will attend local policy workshops, public hearings, and public strategic workshops, just to learn more about comprehensive planning and new developments, but to also build those critical relationships that facilitate belonging."

"Civic muscle requires the community to be aware of what is taking place, discuss plans, and formulate relevant questions based on their unique concerns. We partner with the NAACP, The Black Teacher Association, and a host of churches in this effort."

Lifelong learning

Another critical element to creating thriving communities is age-appropriate learning, Jones said, beginning with early childhood programs and continuing through post-secondary and adult education.

ICS has provided entrepreneurial training courses to various groups, including veterans. In June of 2023 in Martinsburg, ICS teamed up with United Way to provide entrepreneurial training to a cohort of nonprofits led by minority organizers. They gathered for a communitywide luncheon and gave overviews of their services to other nonprofits and to donors to the United Way of the Eastern Panhandle and the Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation.

"This project provided monetary prizes for the participants but also provided exposure to the community on programs and partners they may not have heard of previously," she said. "Many grants call for diverse, collaborative teaming that is meaningful, and these types of networking events can spur those partnerships."

Humane housing

"Access to humane housing can determine who thrives and who struggles to survive," Jones said.

Those who don't benefit from having a home that has been passed down to them by a family member of a previous generation may struggle to access housing otherwise, and ICS is working with the Eastern Panhandle HOME Consortium of West Virginia, which provides home-buyer assistance, to determine solutions for more affordable housing. I believe our legislators are aware that this problem may require innovative, creative thinking in our policy amendments or new policy. I also believe public-private partnerships may be the best way to make the economic case for any new developments. The bottom line for this solution is not monetary gain, it must be social impact if we want a resilient economy that retains Mountaineers."

Those West Virginia residents Jones wants to take care of include members of her own family.



A Little Free Library is available at Fishermen's Hall in Charles Town.

“ There is a lesson in every undertaking, even if you don't win.

– Jamila Jones

“Collectively, the impact I hope to achieve is a more resilient community for my children to live, love, and work in as they grow older,” she said. “I know everyone wishes the best for their children, and as children return to care for parents, the community has to work for them, too.”

While she wants to serve the broader community, “my starting point is the minority community,” Jones said. “I think we all play a part in an integrated fashion, but the minority and underserved community is my passion because that is how I grew up. I was the underserved and the minority, so that is just what I know authentically.

“The outcome I wish for is to see more diversity in the small business arena because there are so many programs and opportunities for growth. West Virginia provides some excellent programs as does the federal government. Our mission is to try to educate anyone seeking the knowledge about the opportunities that are out there.”

How to help

Those in the Eastern Panhandle focusing on workforce development, tourism, and minority health grants are encouraged to partner with ICS to increase their area of coverage and diversify their offerings, Jones said.

“We may have a different approach to a similar problem that is replicable. There is a lesson in every undertaking, even if you don't win,” she said.

Visit www.ics-wv.com.



West Virginia Rural Health Association

Our Mission

The West Virginia Rural Health Association (WVRHA) advocates for empowering all West Virginians to advance their quality of life, their well-being, and their access to excellence in rural health care. Our mission is to unite people, communities, and organizations to strengthen rural health in West Virginia.



Become A Member

By being a member of the West Virginia Rural Health Association, you become a powerful advocate for empowering all West Virginians to advance their quality of life, their well-being, and their access to excellence in rural health care.

The WVRHA is a non-profit, grassroots, member-driven organization. A membership with us includes a variety of people and organizations that are interested in the health of rural West Virginians throughout the state. The WVRHA membership works together to identify the health care concerns of rural West Virginians and find ways to improve services in our communities.

The West Virginia Rural Health Association strives to represent the diversity of West Virginia, and we encourage people of all ethnicities, genders, and lifestyles to join.



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