



Southern Ohio Officials Urge Local Say, Data Access in Addiction Realm

Local mental health and addiction boards need access to timely Medicaid patient data and should have more say in provider certification, Southern Ohio government officials told the new Senate Addiction and Community Revitalization Committee at its inaugural hearing Monday in Portsmouth.

Senate leadership announced formation of the committee, chaired by Sen. Terry Johnson (R-McDermott), on Friday. (See *The Hannah Report*, 6/3/22.)

Senate President Matt Huffman (R-Lima) attended Monday's hearing and gave opening remarks, saying in this and other areas lawmakers can struggle to know whether what they've authorized and funded is making a difference.

"We're not doing this so we can fund things. We're doing this so we can change a culture," Huffman said.

Johnson said he'd asked the Legislative Service Commission to research various areas, and got data back on some but not all inquiries. "What I really take away from the work that they did ... there are a lot of categories that we can't nail down how much money we're spending, where it's going. And understand me, this isn't a committee that's just up to nitpick and say 'We need to spend money better.' In order to actually help people, we need to make sure those dollars are being spent appropriately," Johnson said.

He expressed the urgency of the problem.

"A lot of things that people can get addicted to aren't necessarily deadly right away, but opioids are a different story ... so people coming to us for treatment, asking for treatment, we need to deliver them the best product possible."

Susan Shultz, executive director of the Adams, Lawrence, Scioto Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Services (ADAHMS) Board, highlighted the importance of Medicaid data to her agency's work.

"We need to know what services are occurring, where we are seeing increased demand, where there are gaps, and what the evolving needs are in local communities. Over the past couple years, we saw where not having timely, accurate and reliable data made responding to a quickly changing

environment more difficult,” said Shultz.



Shultz noted a “proliferation” of substance use disorder providers opening in the area without the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) notifying the local board, saying the board could have weighed in on providers that had shut down and were seeking to reopen with a different name. Scioto County Commissioner Bryan Davis made a similar point.

“I believe lack of visibility and oversight at the local level has allowed some treatment providers to prey upon victims instead of helping victims. Recovery statistics are not widely shared, and many patients are trapped in an endless cycle of MAT [medication assisted treatment] where recovery is a dream and providers are benefitting financially from their demise,” Davis said.

Increased treatment capacity in the area has brought in many clients from outside the area seeking treatment, they said.

“Local government officials have contacted us regarding the influx of clients coming into our area seeking treatment and not leaving our county after they leave the programs against staff advice and end up on the streets homeless and getting into trouble with law enforcement or overdosing and putting our fire and EMS under more stress than they already have. If we had access to more Medicaid data we would be able to figure out where the clients came from and hopefully once they leave the program, can help them get back to their home counties from which they came,” said Shultz.

Economic development in the area is “hampered by a continued narrative of drug use and decay,” said Johnson.

Huffman asked whether the barrier to Medicaid data sharing is statutory. Shultz said she doesn’t believe there’s anything in law to prevent it, but the state agencies cite Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) concerns.

Sen. Robert McColley (R-Napoleon) asked her to elaborate on how the data would be useful. Shultz said it’s hard to coordinate services for someone when she doesn’t know where they’ve been. Some hospitals drop people off at the Taco Bell parking lot with no follow-up services scheduled, she said.

Area resident Andrea Tackett testified to concerns about the welfare of children from families struggling with addiction. Tackett said as a foster parent she’s seen successful reunification of children with a mother who succeeded in treatment, but also “a horrible, rushed reunification that led to the death of my foster baby.”

“I feel that rushing an infant who was born with drugs in his system back to the biological family should never be the goal. As a society the idea that the parents and children should always be reunited is wrong. I would like for the children to come first and the wellbeing of the child always

first ... is flip flopped in our current system. Reunification is not always what is best for the child and the system needs to change. I am an advocate for children first and foremost,” Tackett said.



She said the adoption process should be sped up to give children permanency.

Huffman suggested officials look into Connect Our Kids, which launched last year in Ohio and looks to help find other family members who might be suitable as adoptive parents or as an interim placement ahead of reunification.

Sen. Frank Hoagland (R-Mingo Junction) asked Tackett her definition of “clean” for drug recovery purposes. Tackett said she thinks parents should be clean at least six months before it’s possible to reunify with children.

Johnson asked Tackett her view on the trajectory of kids who grow up in households where they witness addiction. “Are they doomed to the same lifestyle, or do most of them break out of it? What are you seeing?” he said.

“From what I have seen, if they are stuck in that environment, they often continue that same lifestyle ... that’s not every case, but in some cases that’s all they’ve seen, so that’s all they know,” Tackett said.

Judge Brent Spencer of Adams County Common Pleas Court testified about the evolution of addiction problems in Southern Ohio – from methamphetamines to prescription pills to heroin and now back to methamphetamines laced with fentanyl and MDMA.

Spencer said he questions the success of current treatment approaches, noting it takes several months for the brain to heal after the last methamphetamine dose.

Other witnesses included Jay Hash, CEO of HopeSource, a treatment provider; and David Mahan, policy director of the Center for Christian Virtue, who argued against expanded access to marijuana.

The committee has a website at <https://tinyurl.com/rvr55fer> , where agendas and testimony are posted.

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