

# ***Mental Health, Substance Use, and Homelessness***

**Florence Community Town Hall**

**September 28, 2022 – Florence, AZ**

## **THE INTERSECTION OF MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS**

The conditions of mental health, substance use, and homelessness are interrelated. They are circular, symbiotic, and successive. For example, if someone has a mental health disorder, they may have troubles interacting with others properly or holding down a job. This can lead to substance use and homelessness.

While not always connected, homelessness is often related to mental health issues. Similarly, homelessness can lead to substance use and mental health issues. While people can experience one of these issues without the other, they are generally connected and interrelated. Once you have one issue, it often begets the other in a circular path. Because these issues are so interrelated, to address one effectively, we need to address them together and systematically.

We are experiencing many difficult challenges in our efforts to assist the homeless. They include the lack of transportation, lack of services, insufficient counselors, and an increase in homeless seniors while at the same time there is less available housing for those who need it.

## **ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND HOMELESSNESS**

We need to focus on education and prevention. It's better to start earlier than later, including building skills with our children so that they can better cope with stress. We also should seek to better identify and address mental health issues earlier through support for both children and their parents as well as through raising awareness of how best to identify and address challenges.

Beginning early, we should teach children how to identify emotions and how to manage challenges and emotions. It's also important to provide skills for addressing and managing stress and trauma. Teaching mindfulness techniques such as yoga should be as important as physical education.

These early prevention strategies would create much greater savings later and should be considered for training curriculum.

While parent education and involvement are important, it can be very challenging to accomplish effectively, even when resources are available. Implementing these early systems is increasingly challenging for schools because of legislation that prevents schools from asking students about some of the issues.

We need to frontload prevention and education, but we also need to address the problems that currently exist. We can create and expand opportunities to address these issues through collaboration and by everyone being more compassionate, knowledgeable and understanding about how best to assist people experiencing these challenges. We should not be turning people away who are asking for assistance.

Addressing transportation challenges so that people can access needed services is critical. We also need an emergency services shelter in Pinal County.

Eighty-five percent of people in the Department of Corrections have a substance use disorder at a cost of \$35,000 per year, per person. This doesn't treat the underlying issue and it is a failure on a global scale of how best to allocate resources. The criminal justice system is the worst way to address this issue. We are simply creating a vicious cycle that impacts them for the rest of their life. Our current system is not set up for success. Instead, it creates a revolving door that hinders people from restarting their life.

## **SETTING PRIORITIES**

Pinal County is growing at a rapid pace, and we need to proactively address these issues now.

As a state we need to better address how to support people coming out of prison so they can integrate more effectively back into the community.

Whether brick and mortar or online, we need a “one stop shop” for people to obtain the resources they need in a more effective and efficient way. 211 is great except not all agencies have their complete information in the system. A one stop shop concept should include personnel (or an informed point of contact) who have been trained to navigate people to needed resources and services.

There should be “no wrong door” for those seeking resources.

One of the greatest challenges for accomplishing these goals is effective collaboration. Instead, our systems are set up for people, organizations, and governments to compete against each other instead of working together. However, we can change this dynamic with dedication and grassroots efforts, working together in our community to create effective programs that we can then take to city and state leaders. We need a champion (or champions) from our community who will advocate on our behalf.

While there is funding available, it often comes with restrictions that prevent those who need it from getting assistance. We need more flexible funding that supports the programs we need most. A strong community that is connected and supportive is critical. Supportive community structures that include loving adults who provide positive support for all children make a big difference.

We need to take action to rebuild and strengthen our family relationships and our relationships with our neighbors so that we have a strong and supportive community that sets the example for our children of how to have strong, loving and supportive relationships.

## **WHAT ARIZONA’S ELECTED LEADERS NEED TO KNOW**

Increase prevention and decrease discipline. The criminal justice system is ill-equipped to handle this issue. Use money currently apportioned to the criminal justice system to instead address mental health, substance use, and homelessness.

It takes a village to support the growth of a child. Create an integrated system that incentivizes cooperation and collaboration and that has a vision big enough for everyone.

We need a vision. We need to address these issues now and not wait for a better time.

Create programs that empower people to solve problems.

## **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 Florence Community Town Hall. Below are individual actions that were shared.

### ***I WILL...***

- Continue to speak the truth
- Say something positive always to anyone who is suffering with mental health, substance use, and/or homelessness.
- Make an effort to say hello to more strangers as I see them throughout my day. I may be the only positive light for them.

- Be the voice for those who need a champion to overcome mental health challenges and barriers and provide a path to healing growth and community support.
- Continue to pay attention to what is going on around me in my community.
- Continue to work with parents in the Eloy community regarding communication, prevention and other family issues through parent workshops.