


Spring 2024 Volume 81, Issue 4

The Alabama

MUNICIPAL

Official publication of the Alabama League of Municipalities

Journal



A Closer Look:
Examining
Community
Health in
Alabama

Special Health Care Issue See pages 18 - 39

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About ALM:

The Alabama League of Municipalities is a nonpartisan membership association of over 450 incorporated cities and towns. Since 1935, the League has worked to strengthen municipal government through advocacy, training and the advancement of effective local leadership. As the recognized voice of Alabama's cities and towns, ALM's member municipalities benefit from a variety of member programs, services and activities that are impossible to accomplish alone.



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The Alabama MUNICIPAL Journal

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Spring 2024 • Volume 81, Issue 4

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On the Cover:

This edition of The Alabama Municipal Journal is dedicated to discussing challenges, presenting resources and sharing success stories to improve access to quality health care options in our communities. Having access to health care is a core component to quality of life as well as the recruitment and retention of economic investment in Alabama's cities and towns. The League is committed to working with local, state and federal leaders to find solutions to this dire situation. Original design created by Karl Franklin.

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A Message from the Editor

Lori Jhons • Communications Director

Greetings, our team is in full swing getting ready for convention, keeping watch over legislation, preparing for summer trainings and more! Over the last year, I have thoroughly enjoyed getting out in your communities, telling your stories and advocating for you.

For years, we have seen a reduction in access to quality health care options in Alabama. As part of the League's goal to support policies to close the gap on access to care, improve recruitment and retention of health care professionals and increase funding for our health care facilities infrastructure, we have dedicated this edition of our magazine to community health. I want to sincerely thank Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner Kent Davis, Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Kim Boswell, the Center for Economic Development at The University of Alabama, Auburn University's Rural Health Initiative and Project Horseshoe Farm for sharing insight into what they are doing to address health care in Alabama and



Lori Jhons and Jean Price Lewis, one of the League's first staffers, have built a great relationship since meeting in the fall.

for providing resources to our members.

Furthermore, I have a few updates to share with you from the communications department. We encourage our members to celebrate and showcase your municipalities and staff during **Municipal Government Week May 12-18**. Gov. Kay Ivey is set to sign the official proclamation the week before with our leadership in attendance. Get creative with ways to participate and be sure to tag our social media pages!

We are excited to announce we have built an in-house studio that we will utilize to bring you more updates, training and even a video podcast. More details will be announced soon! Additionally, I am happy to share that you can now access our press releases, photo gallery and videos by clicking on our new "Newsroom" tab on the website. We have also added an internship program page to the "Newsroom" tab for any interested candidates to stay updated, as new deadlines are announced. I want to give a special shout out to Tammia Jacobs, Ella Painter and Adam Kilpatrick for setting the bar high for our internship program. They all graduate in May, and we wish them the best in their careers!

Lastly, I encourage you to follow our social media pages, send me your news announcements and any ideas for future articles that can help the membership. Please reach out if I can ever be helpful to you at ljhons@almonline.org or 334-430-0009. ■



Ella Painter, ALM's communications intern, and Lori Jhons interview Dr. John Dorsey about Project Horseshoe Farm.



Lori Jhons and Mayor Ralph Hellmich showcase an article featuring Foley's participation in the ACE program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lori J.".

Lori Davis Jhons

QUICK GUIDE

2024 ANNUAL CONVENTION HUNTSVILLE MAY 15 - 18



Schedule subject to change. See the event app for up-to-date information. Yapp app download information on page 11

WEDNESDAY MAY 15

9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Registration and Help Desk

2 - 3:30 p.m.

Opening Session: President's Address, Municipal Service Awards

3:30 - 5 p.m.

Ask Your Attorney Booths

3:45 - 4:45 p.m.

General Session: For the Love of Cities, How to Fall in Love with Your City
Peter Kageyama, Author - *The Emotional Infrastructure of Places*

5 - 7 p.m.

Welcome Reception (hosted by ALM and the City of Huntsville)

THURSDAY MAY 16

CITY SHIRT DAY
Wear your city shirt today with pride!

8 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Registration and Help Desk

8:30 - 9:30 a.m.

General Session: From Conflict to Conversation - Matt Lehrman, Speaker, Social Prosperity Partners

9:45 - 10:45 a.m.

Concurrent Sessions: Rural Health Care Challenges and Opportunities; Sweet Trails Alabama; Transforming Alabama's Economy through Electric Vehicles

10:45 a.m. - Noon

Ask Your Attorney Booths

11 a.m. - Noon

AMIC Annual Business Meeting

Noon - 2 p.m.

Lunch on your own

1:30 - 3:30 p.m.

Alabama Association of Municipal Clerks Meeting "Clerks Day" (see app for more information)

1:30 - 5 p.m.

Ask Your Attorney Booths

2 - 3:30 p.m.

Concurrent Sessions: Sensory-Inclusive Training for Law Enforcement; Flawless: Training Front Line Workers to Succeed in Customer Service; How Benefits can Recruit and Retain High Quality Employees

3:30 - 6 p.m.

Municipal Marketplace Reception

6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Volkert Rooftop Reception (Free event, but RSVP is required.)

FRIDAY MAY 17

8 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Registration and Help Desk

7:30 - 10:30 a.m.

Municipal Marketplace Breakfast

10:30 a.m. - Noon

Roundtable Discussions by Population (see app for room assignments)

Noon - 2 p.m.

Lunch on your own

2 - 3:30 p.m.

General Session: Ask Your Attorney Panel

4 - 5 p.m.

Annual Business Session

6:30 - 8 p.m.

President's Dinner (Pre-purchased ticket holders only. Ticket purchased at time of registration.)

8 p.m.

Closing Reception: ATL Groove Factory (No ticket required. This event is open to all attendees.)

ALM Celebrates Successful First Quarter, Having Productive Spring

Gregory D. Cochran • Executive Director

Spring in Alabama is one of my favorite times of the year. Flowers blooming, the return of warmer weather and longer days bring renewed energy and joy. We also have much on our plates during the spring. We kicked off the year with ALM's Advocacy Day and the National League of Cities' Congressional Cities Conference in Washington, D.C., and we have much to look forward to as we prepare for our annual convention.

This year's Advocacy Day in February was well attended and had a great lineup of speakers including Lt. Gov. Will Ainsworth, Alabama House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter, House Majority Leader Scott Stadhagen and Minority Leader Anthony Daniels who all shared their insights, priorities and perspectives on several issues facing the Alabama Legislature this session. Our officials also heard from Todd Stacy, host of Alabama Public Television's Capitol Journal and founder of the Alabama Daily News.

Additionally, the NLC's Congressional Cities Conference was well attended with more than 170 Alabama municipal officials traveling to D.C. to meet with our congressional delegation and hear from President Joe Biden as well as other federal dignitaries. Alabama's own attorney general, Steve Marshall, led a panel discussion on the national opioid lawsuit settlements and how these funds are to be distributed locally to help communities overcome the challenges brought about by these addictions impacting individuals, families and our society. ALM hosted several events during the conference for Alabama officials including a reception for our congressional delegation and breakfast with U.S. senators Tommy Tuberville and Katie Britt. We also heard from Britton Bonner with Adams and Reese; Irma Esparza Diggs, NLC senior executive and director of federal advocacy; and Kayla Bass, ALM deputy director, during our caucus meeting. Many thanks to our friends that sponsored the congressional reception on Monday evening!

The ALM Annual Convention is right around the corner, and I hope you have made plans to attend. We have a wonderful lineup of keynote speakers, concurrent session topics, roundtable discussions and a full marketplace expo for you to meet with a variety of vendors. Be sure to bring your dancing shoes as we conclude with the sounds of Atlanta Groove Factory!

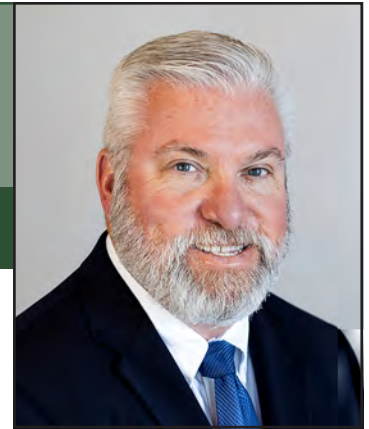
We appreciate our members' trust and engagement with our organization. Every day, our team diligently works with legislative and congressional policymakers to ensure they understand how state and federal policy changes impact your ability to manage local resources. ALM's Bryan Parker, Baker Allen, Rob Johnston, Kaleb Beck, Lori Jhons, Kayla Bass and Hal Bloom work tirelessly during the legislative session to represent our members. However, for us to be truly successful, it is critical for you to also be engaged in sharing the challenges and opportunities facing your community with legislators and our congressional delegation. Ideally, building vibrant communities where people choose to live, work and play is a partnership of local, state and federal policymakers on behalf of their constituents. Our municipal officials are constantly working to recruit new economic investment, build thriving downtowns and safe communities. Municipalities are the foundation of Alabama's economy.

In closing, if we have not seen you in 2024 yet, we look forward to catching up with you in Huntsville or this summer during our in-state congressional luncheons! Peace be with you. ■



Leadership Perspective

Mayor Randy Garrison • Hartselle • ALM President



As I contemplate drafting this article, my year serving as president of the Alabama League of Municipalities is coming to an end. Time passes by faster as you get older. If you have not discovered this phenomenon, I promise that you will soon. Others who held this position prior to me have frequently mentioned how fast the year goes by, and they are correct.

It has truly been an honor and privilege to work with all of you, serve alongside you and represent you at various meetings, conferences and events during this past year. I have enjoyed getting to know many of you better and can absolutely say I have made many new friends. I hope the connections I have made continue to grow stronger for years to come.

I have learned so much interacting with so many of you, and I appreciate the fellowship we have enjoyed at various events this past year. Although we face different circumstances, opportunities and situations each day, we still have much in common. The tie that binds each of us together is the desire to do the best we can for those we represent. Our daily task is to work diligently and with wisdom to leave our cities and towns in a better way or place than we found when we came into elected office.

I have also been blessed to work alongside the impressive group of men and women that make up the Alabama League of Municipalities. I would have to search far and wide to find a more dedicated group representing our cities and towns than the crew at the League. These folks are always there when needed and work to make sure that each of us representing our cities/towns has the best information available.

When I gave my acceptance speech at convention last year, I considered how it would be to follow in the footsteps of such great past presidents. In fact, I was concerned if I was up to the task, but each of them still serving have been incredibly supportive. I feel honored and humbled to serve with such a fine group of men and women.

I would also like to thank each of you for the support you have shown me this past year. I remember challenging each of you to get more connected with the League, and you all have done just that. Each event held this year was better attended than in years past. This is a testament to your dedication to the League as well as your own municipality.

Even as I move on from this position, please know I am still available if I can lend a hand, offer a listening ear or help in any way. May God continue to bless each of you and your city/town. ■



President Randy Garrison and the League proudly hosted Hartselle Area Chamber of Commerce's IMPACT Student participants in April! They got a firsthand lesson on local and state government from some of our state's top leaders, including Gov. Kay Ivey.





Mayor Mark Saliba • Dothan • ALM Vice President

One of my favorite pieces of advice comes from James 1:19, which says, “Let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

Our annual Advocacy Day provides an example of how I am able to implement this verse. As legislators are sharing their thoughts for the upcoming legislative session, one of my go-to techniques is to listen and feverishly write notes. I find that it is easier to be quick to hear and write, but it is a lot harder to not speak too much until I have had time to dissect what was said, especially if I get a bit frustrated! However, at the end of the day, I can go back and circle the buzz words I heard like child-care tax credits, housing credits, health care, gaming and lottery, workforce development issues and more.

To me, it gives great insight into what matches with our community’s projects and objectives and what theirs are, giving us a better chance to obtain funding. I hope that you find this to be true for you as well. The same is accomplished in D.C. at the National League of Cities’ Congressional City Conference. Many topics were discussed but the main focus was on when Congress would pass the funding bills that keep the government open and give local governments the budgetary certainty they need. That to me is one of our biggest challenges as elected officials - positioning ourselves to advance our cities’ and communities’ priorities! I give a huge thank you to our League staff that assists us in accomplishing this both in Montgomery and Washington.

Please prepare to be in Huntsville on May 15-18 for a great convention, general sessions and expo. Most importantly prepare to be with your ALM friends and family! ■

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Charles Black - *Councilmember, Priceville, Vice Chair*

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Crystal Smitherman - *Councilmember, Birmingham, Vice Chair*

Committee on Energy, Environment and Natural Resources (EENR)

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Don Mack - *Councilmember, Centreville, Vice Chair*

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Committee on Human Development (HD)

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Committee on Community and Economic Development (CED)

Joe Watson - *Councilmember, Brewton, Chair*
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We are proud to support Alabama's Firefighters through the state's first supplemental cancer benefits policy



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- 🔥 **Endorsed by the Alabama League of Municipalities**



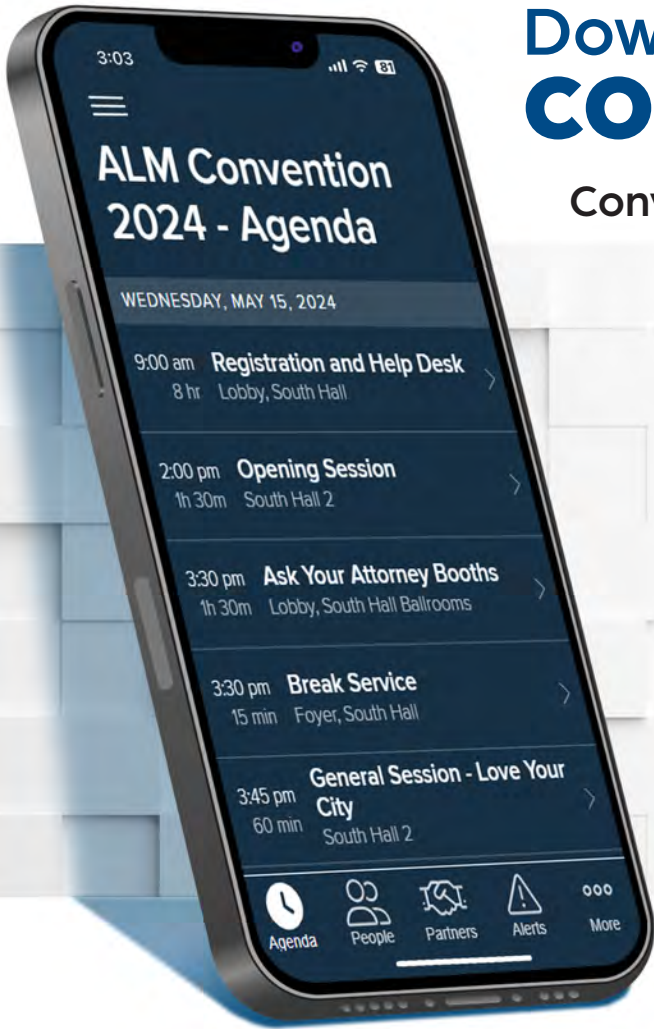
Insurance Coverage Options:

- 🔥 **Up to \$50,000 in Cancer Benefits**
- 🔥 **Up to \$3,000 in Monthly Disability Benefits**
- 🔥 **Guaranteed Coverage**
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Make plans to join the League for training in 2024!

- May 15 - 18: Annual Convention and Expo, Huntsville
- June/July: CMO Regional Trainings
(Two Dates Remaining! June 20 - Vestavia Hills; July 18 - Hartselle)
- August: ALM In-State Congressional Luncheons, (locations and dates TBD)
- October 30 - November 1: Municipal Leadership Institute and League Graduation Ceremonies, Orange Beach
- November 13 - 16: NLC City Summit, Tampa, FL (www.nlc.org)
- January - December: Anytime Training (www.almonline.org/AnytimeTraining)

SAVE

THE

DATE!

2024 CMO Training Calendar



Visit www.almonline.org/UpcomingTraining for training and registration information.

More than 170 Alabama Municipal Officials Attend Congressional City Conference

More than 170 members of the Alabama League of Municipalities attended the National League of Cities' Congressional City Conference in Washington, D.C. on March 9-13. The conference brought together over 2,500 elected and appointed city, town and village leaders from around the United States to focus on federal policy issues important to local governments. We are grateful for the NLC's leadership team and are proud to be an affiliate as it celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.

The League hosted Alabama-specific meetings during the conference, providing municipal leaders with state and federal updates along with resources and networking opportunities. Several members of Alabama's congressional delegation met with members at our reception, including Rep. Robert Aderholt, Rep. Jerry Carl, Rep. Barry Moore, Rep. Mike Rogers and Rep. Terri Sewell. U.S. Sen. Tommy Tuberville and U.S. Sen. Katie Britt also shared updates during a breakfast event.

Another highlight of the conference was listening to Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall speak on a panel with Donald Mason, mayor of Zanesville, OH, and Mark Hayes, executive director of the Arkansas Municipal League. The discussion focused on litigation settlements with major opioid pharmaceutical distributors and manufacturing companies, and the impact the opioid crisis has had on municipalities in America. ALM and Attorney General Marshall's office have been working together to ensure that Alabama's municipal leaders are taking advantage of more than \$800 million in opioid settlements. Scan the QR code below to learn more.

Furthermore, members had an opportunity to hear keynote speeches from President Joe Biden, several of his cabinet members and high-ranking staffers, members of Congress and federal agency representatives. They also participated in NLC's Hill Day program, which allowed them to meet with members of Congress directly at their offices on Capitol Hill.

The League would like to thank the more than 20 members that serve on NLC's federal advocacy committees and constituency groups' boards as well as Birmingham City Councilman Darrell O'Quinn, who is serving his second term on NLC's national board of directors. The League also extends sincere gratitude to the sponsors of our congressional reception and breakfast. ■



Scan the QR code to learn more about Alabama's opioid settlements.





Women in Government Brunch Highlights Women Mean Business

The Alabama League of Municipalities hosted the fourth annual gathering of Women in Government in March to celebrate Women's History Month! The League proudly presented Jean Price Lewis with a resolution honoring her trailblazing career in public service, which included working at the League in the late 1930s and for two U.S. presidents. If you have not read her story, check out our fall 2023 edition of *The Alabama Municipal Journal*.

During the brunch, Betsie Norton, chief of staff at Airbus' U.S. manufacturing facility, delivered a riveting, keynote speech to empower our ladies.

Additionally, we held our first Women Mean Business Panel to discuss the state of Alabama's workforce and initiatives aimed at improving our labor force participation rate. We would like to thank Helena Duncan, president and CEO of the Business Council of Alabama; Robin Ricks, Manufacture Alabama's vice president of policy and advocacy; and Patty Hughston, executive director of the Paths for Success Foundation, for sharing great insight and resources with our attendees.

Duncan transparently shared a reality that many women could relate to when she said, "Our hats never come off. We're just changing them. We go from working to moms to wives and then you just start over the next day. So, finding the energy to do that as well as trying to be the best at your job and overcoming the challenges of people not feeling like a woman should be in that role, it just takes sheer determination and grind every single day."





Several state leaders, including many of the attendees and their organizations, are leading the effort to increase Alabama's workforce participation. A one-percentage-point increase in the rate represents about 23,000 more people in the labor force.

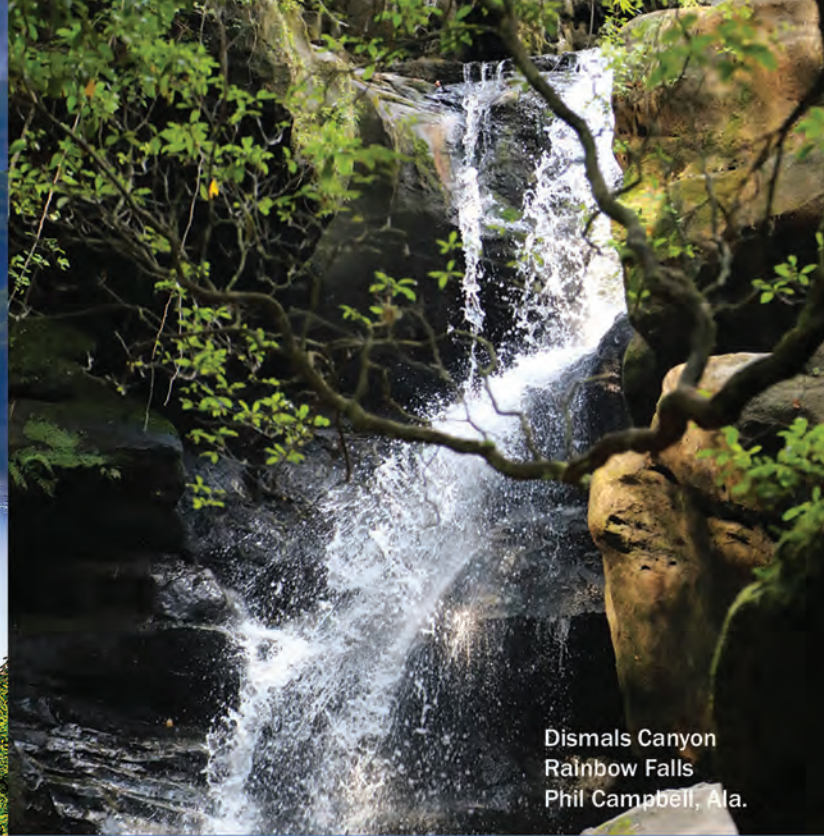
"You used to could up the wages for individuals and they would come to work. That's not the case anymore," Hughston shared during the discussion. "We are going to have to look a lot deeper into what's going to motivate individuals to come off the sidelines and to get in the workforce."

It is safe to say this is an issue that is going to require a real collaborative effort, from all of us, to accomplish, and we are here to help. ■





Lake Guntersville
Guntersville, Ala.



Dismals Canyon
Rainbow Falls
Phil Campbell, Ala.



U.S. Space & Rocket Center
Huntsville, Ala.



Jesse Owens
Memorial Park,
Danville, Ala.

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MUNICIPAL ★ ADVOCACY

TAKES CENTER STAGE IN MONTGOMERY

Advocacy is the spirit that drives the Alabama League of Municipalities. In February, we hosted our annual Advocacy Day at the Alabama Activity Center in the heart of downtown Montgomery, where Alabama politics and citizens' daily lives intersect. League members had the opportunity to forge new connections, strengthen old ones, learn more about the legislative process and voice their ideas and concerns with state lawmakers.

We were honored to hear from Lt. Gov. Will Ainsworth about his plans for the session and his innovative ideas about improving the state's workforce and education system. We also heard from House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter, House Majority Leader Scott Stadhagen and House Minority Leader Anthony Daniels during an informative panel that displayed great camaraderie among their respective offices. Additionally, Alabama Daily News founder, Todd Stacy, spoke about the different bills being debated in Congress and the Alabama Legislature and how they could potentially impact the state's municipalities. Michael Berson, a partner at Adams and Reese, presented on the basics of appropriations, and members of our team provided organizational updates.

When the League unites on Advocacy Day, progress is made, and the future of Alabama's municipalities brightens. Together, our communities will continue to prosper. ■



A Closer Look: Examining Community Health in Alabama

Everyone needs the occasional check up, even the great state of Alabama! In this special section, we explore the efforts of many heroic community actors and programs, designed with the health and the improvement thereof, of Alabama's citizens in mind.



LaFayette Initiative Offers a Glimpse into the Future of Rural Health Care



Lori Johns • Communications Director • ALM

Imagine needing dire medical care but every nearby health facility is closed. Imagine having to turn a small fire station lobby into a makeshift health clinic to help dozens of people a day because the nearest hospital is over 30 miles away. Imagine an EMT being on call to cover 420 square miles because no other fire stations in the county have ambulance services.

This was the reality the LaFayette Fire and EMS Department faced on a daily basis during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and is sadly the reality many rural communities still face with no primary care clinics and hospitals close by. Fire Chief Jim Doody, a native of Long Island, New York, had just accepted the chief position in December 2019 right before all things as the world knew it came to a screeching halt. Luckily, this veteran, who served 13 years in Afghanistan as fire chief at Bagram Air Force Base and five years as the subject matter expert for the U.S. Army in crash, fire and rescue in the Balkans, was tactful enough to

help steer his team and his newfound community through the pandemic and toward better health care services.

Getting Started

About three years ago, Auburn University Outreach and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System were introduced to OnMed, a Florida-based company that produces self-contained telehealth stations, offering immediate access to primary and urgent care. Aware of the lack of resources in rural areas, the university set out to identify a community to set up the service as part of its Rural Health Initiative (RHI). Around this same time, Chief Doody notified the university of the challenges his firefighters and paramedics were dealing with trying to provide medical services all while doing their jobs to respond to emergency calls. This helped lead to the city of LaFayette, the county seat of Chambers County, being selected in addition to its high rates of disease and chronic illnesses such as diabetes,



The lobby of the Chambers County Community Health and Wellness Center was renovated with funding from grants. Inset: Chambers County Community Health and Wellness Center opened in LaFayette in March 2023.

hypertension, cervical cancer and obesity. At one point, during the pandemic, Chambers County had the highest COVID-19 mortality rates in the state.

Seeing the need, Auburn University, the city of LaFayette and the Chambers County Commission partnered together to establish a plan to bring Chambers County citizens critical health care services. The RHI team visited a rural community in Texas facing similar obstacles to health care access to learn more about OnMed’s telehealth station. Working together, they identified a previously vacated health clinic in LaFayette as the ideal place to house the telehealth unit as well as to provide broader health care resources for the area. This collaboration culminated with the opening of the Chambers County Community Health and Wellness Center in March 2023.

“We wanted to flip the numbers around for health disparities, and one of the biggest reasons why Alabama ranks pretty low in the U.S. is because people don’t have access,” Chief Doody said. “We wanted to be able to give them access to a facility at little to no-cost health care to flip those numbers around, and we couldn’t have done it without our great partners from Auburn.”

Hollie Cost, Ph. D., serves as the assistant vice president for Auburn University Outreach and Public Service as well as the director of the Rural Health Initiative. She previously served two terms as the mayor of Montevallo, Alabama, and two terms on its city council.

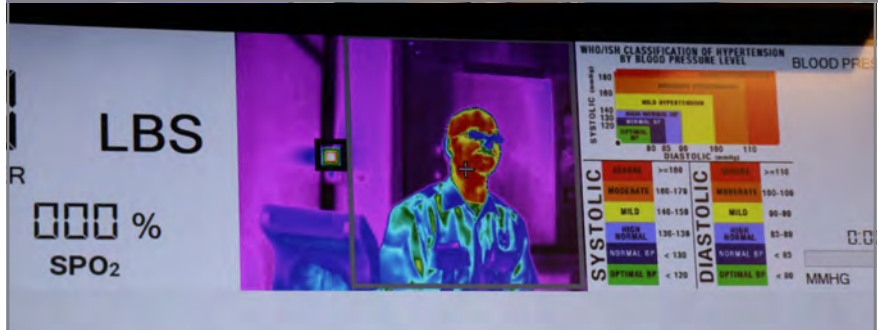
“The model we have identified is really designated to shift the landscape of rural health care throughout the state of Alabama,” Dr. Cost said. “We know that there are great disparities in health care in the state. We know that there is a definite shortage of health care professionals in the state, and so what we’re doing is, we are looking at how can we fill the gap.”

Top: Erin Reynolds-Peacock leads the Rural Health Initiative’s audiology services.

Second: Feretha Armstead, a native of LaFayette, visited the OnMed station to consult a doctor about blood pressure issues.

Inset: Thermal imaging is one of the many medical devices used to evaluate a patient’s health status when visiting the OnMed station.

Bottom: Fire Chief Jim Doody demonstrates the services the OnMed telehealth station provides.



Services

Within the Chambers County Community Health and Wellness Center, the OnMed Care Station allows local residents to walk in without an appointment and visit with licensed health care professionals in a private, virtual setting instead of driving over half an hour to the nearest hospital. At the push of a button, a clinician will appear within minutes to listen to and evaluate a patient. The unit has the following capabilities: thermal imaging to determine an individual's temperature and if they have a sinus infection; a blood pressure monitor; a scale; a pulse oximeter to determine oxygen saturation; a retractable stethoscope; and a retractable hand-held camera to closely examine abnormalities like a rash or to check for infections like strep throat. When the retractable camera is deployed, a patient can see exactly what the doctor sees on the screen. As soon as the patient locks the door, the unit's glass fogs over to provide complete privacy during a visit and is sanitized immediately after each use.

Feretha Armstead, a native of LaFayette, visited the station after dealing with blood pressure issues. She liked the fact that it was an easy and efficient process. She said, "I was very much at ease. I didn't have any intimidation."

OnMed services are capable of providing up to 85% of the services received in a traditional primary care visit. This station is currently one of only five in the entire U.S.; another one is located nearby at Tuskegee University.

In addition to the station, the center has three exam rooms for inpatient services; a lab for specialized testing for common bacterial and viral infections; an audiology room used to conduct hearing screenings and tests; and a lobby used for health and wellness programs. The center provides weekly audiology screenings and speech language pathology services as well as monthly multidisciplinary health screenings, medication consultations and vaccination clinics.

The center is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and on Saturdays from 1-6 p.m. The building is owned by the city and has two administrative employees that operate it during the week. College student volunteers, fellows or other trusted members of the community operate the center during the weekends, primarily letting people in and out as they visit the OnMed station. The OnMed doctor facilitates the medical exam, prescribes any medications and gives referrals if further evaluation is needed.

Community Impact

Rachel Snoddy serves as the Chambers County extension coordinator through the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. She manages the center's scheduling coverage

"We really are helping people improve their health and improve their lives."

~ Rachel Snoddy, Chambers County Extension Coordinator

and facilitates its day-to-day operations. She is integral to coordinating efforts between project partners, city and county officials and the public. She admits the center had a slow start when it opened a year ago, but various factors contributed to that, ranging from lack of awareness and misconceptions about the technology, to uninsured individuals assuming they had to have coverage to be seen.

All of the initiative's partners have been very intentional about meeting with various community leaders and groups and attending local events to help educate citizens about their little to no-cost services. They have also hosted multiple demonstrations with civic groups, churches and anyone interested to help relieve timidity and spread the word.

"Our citizens have been so excited. The more things we add the better it is because we have such a lack of resources here for health care and being able to offer so many additional things with all of our partnerships, it's been amazing," Snoddy said. "We really are helping people improve their health and improve their lives."

The center saw 1,703 visitors from March 2023 to March 2024, with 924 of those consultations being specifically with the OnMed station. Although the center is located in Chambers County, it is available to anyone in need of health services. People from nearby areas of Georgia have even visited.

Chief Doody said, "This has been a huge impact. We are the busiest care station in the U.S. and proudly so."

The goal of the center is to not only provide medical services but to also provide preventative care and follow up treatment. A great example of the RHI's commitment to accessibility and equity in health care is through its audiology services.

Erin Reynolds-Peacock, MS, serves as a clinical lecturer in Auburn University's Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences and leads the RHI's audiology services. Due to cost, she said that throughout her career she has often seen patients wait five years or more before they decide to have their hearing examined. Some patients are aware they need hearing assistance, but still wait to get hearing aids.

Although the majority of the center’s services are free, a comprehensive hearing test (which lasts approximately an hour compared to the free two-minute hearing screening) and hearing aids are not. However, Reynolds-Peacock makes patients aware of all options whether they are insured or not. Auburn University’s Speech and Hearing Clinic has established a reduced-cost service model or sliding fee scale for individuals unable to afford hearing health care at the center and has started building a used hearing aid bank. Moreover, they have successfully fitted their first patient through this recycled hearing aid option.

math and statistics, kinesiology, public health, audiology, nutrition, nursing and pre-med. The seven fellows, one for each discipline, begin in the spring and have a year to complete their individual projects.

“The Rural Health Fellowship is really designated to build

Fellows Program

A key component to the success of this innovative health model is the fellowship program. Linda Gibson-Young, Ph.D., has been an essential member of the leadership team facilitating the three-year-old Rural Health Initiative. She is a professor and outreach coordinator for Auburn University’s College of Nursing. She also oversees the Rural Health Fellows Program and is the primary liaison for undergraduate volunteers at the Chambers County Community Health and Wellness Center. The fellows program involves seven diverse disciplines from Auburn University, spanning undergraduate to graduate levels, with each fellow spearheading individual projects at the center. The disciplines include



Top: Chambers County Community Health and Wellness Center provides a variety of health education and wellness services outside of its telehealth unit.

Bottom: Partners of the Rural Health Initiative stand in front of the Chambers County Community Health and Wellness Center. Pictured left to right: Debra Ward, Rachel Snoddy, Dr. Hollie Cost, Chief Jim Doody, Erin Reynolds-Peacock and Dr. Linda Gibson-Young.



an interest in rural environments,” Dr. Gibson-Young said. “We want these students and these fellows to have an opportunity to really get into the rural environment to learn as much as possible about the under-resourced areas that we have in Auburn’s backyard.”

They conduct a community needs assessment with community members, leaders and the school system’s nurses and counselors. They then use that feedback to determine how their projects can address those issues. Each fellow also has a faculty advisor to assist them with their project as well as teaching them how to perform clinical services. Examples of needs that have been identified are mental health resources, women’s health services, asthma education and speech therapy.

Dr. Gibson-Young shared feedback saying, “Students have been excited. They want to work in rural settings. They want to give back to rural communities.”

Funding Expansion

With an endeavor this big, it was imperative for the RHI to apply for state and federal grants as well as secure several private funders. Auburn University, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama and ALFA provided the initial seed money for the Rural Health Initiative. The Chambers County Commission helped secure \$400,000 from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs for renovations and COVID-19 resources for the Chambers County center. They were able to renovate the lobby and one wing and are hoping to renovate the final four wings.

The United States Department of Agriculture recently awarded the initiative a telemedicine grant to install telehealth carts in 14 locations across the state, including four hub sites, where providers can see patients remotely, and 10 community sites where patients can receive treatment. The telehealth carts are different from OnMed stations. They are smaller carts with an interactive screen and a few diagnostic tools that will connect patients with primary care services from East Alabama Health, substance use disorder treatment through the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s Beacon Recovery program and mental health care by Auburn University’s Psychological Services Department.

The Alabama Department of Finance also allocated \$2 million of American Rescue Plan Act funding to support telehealth services within the initiative. This will allow the RHI to expand and create four more OnMed stations in the Black Belt; one of them is going to be in Wilcox County. Organizers expect two of them to be open by the end of the year and the remaining two to be operational within two years.



City of LaFayette

STRENGTH WOVEN IN

Looking Ahead

Dr. Cost said, “I believe that my past experience being a mayor really helped me in this position because what I recognize is it’s so important to get the community fully engaged.”

For communities that are interested in a program like theirs, she recommends they get all their leaders on board and designate a point person. Although it is a team effort, Chief Doody is held in high regard as their “health champion” for being a strong point person and advocate for the work they are doing. He even has started a program that allows Auburn nursing students to ride along with him and his team so they can get to know the community better and see what it is like to be on the EMS side before someone makes it to the hospital. The city of LaFayette recently presented Chief Doody with their Hometown Hero Award as well as the Friend of Extension Award for his contributions to the Chambers County Health and Wellness Center and the broader LaFayette community.

Dr. Cost said, “The reason we’re able to do what we do here is because we have these very strong, trusting relationships. It’s not about territory. It’s not even about ownership. It’s about serving the people, and that’s what we have to put at the forefront.”

Chief Doody and Dr. Cost attended the Alabama League of Municipalities’ first Alabama Health Care Summit in the spring of 2023 to advocate for other rural communities to consider this type of partnership. Chief Doody envisions this initiative being mirrored throughout every rural community in the U.S.

He said, “I think this whole partnership and the team we have, I think it’s all of God’s plan to make things better for rural communities.” ■

PROJECT HORSESHOE FARM MAKES STRIDES IN BUILDING COMMUNITY HEALTH IN GREENSBORO

ELLA PAINTER ◉ ALM COMMUNICATIONS INTERN



On main street in downtown Greensboro, an inviting three-story hotel beckons to passersby. The Horseshoe Farm community center, also known by some locals as the Old Greensboro Hotel, has taken on a new life after being rescued from disrepair by Project Horseshoe Farm, a nonprofit focused on supporting community health. Today, the once dilapidated building, which was featured on the Alabama Historical Commission's "Places in Peril" list, plays an influential role in rebuilding a rural Black Belt city, from the inside out.

After stepping inside, visitors find light-filled rooms bustling with laughter as community members chat over lunch and make arts and crafts together. Meanwhile, a group of fellows, the nonprofit's volunteers and potential medical and graduate school students, float around the kitchen as they tidy up and prepare for the afternoon's programming.

Dr. John Dorsey, a California native and psychiatrist, founded Project Horseshoe Farm with the mission of promoting the health of rural communities, both physically and socially. Dr. Dorsey's inspiration for the program formed during his community psychiatric residency at University of California Davis Medical Center, where he discovered that a piece of the puzzle was missing for both patients and medical professionals.

"It really dawned on me that the types of patients we were taking care of in community psychiatry settings, including those struggling with mental illness, relationship challenges, histories of abuse, and multiple chronic illnesses really had a lot more in common with the patients we were taking care of in most medical settings," Dr. Dorsey said.

This realization formed the seeds of Project Horseshoe Farm. Dr. Dorsey moved to Alabama in 2005, searching for a more intimate community to practice and live in. He began his time in the state with intentions of working at one of Alabama's two psychiatric hospitals, Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. However, he was informed on his trip across country that the hospital no longer needed his services. Jobless and directionless, he was fortunate to stumble upon Greensboro.

After spending his first two years settling in and getting to know the community, the beginnings of the project

formed with an after-school youth program in 2007. After this small start, the program has since expanded to offer three more programs to different groups of vulnerable community members, ensuring no one in Greensboro is left behind. Its other programs include: the health partners; community center; and housing and nursing home programs.

Today, Project Horseshoe Farm has expanded its scope and has two other sites, one in Perry County, Alabama, and one in Pomona, California. These sites offer similar services to the original Greensboro site and work to improve the health of their communities.

Community Health Gap Year Fellowship

A major aspect of Project Horseshoe Farm is the partnership it has with college students interested in attending medical or graduate school after a gap year, a break taken after completing undergraduate school. The nonprofit's "Community Health Gap Year Fellowship" application process is extremely competitive, attracting interest from graduates nationwide. Once selected, fellows begin the year-long program each June and live in housing provided by Project Horseshoe Farm.

Locals eagerly await the arrival of the new batch of fellows each summer, and the local newspaper, The Greensboro Watchman, even publishes a short bio about each along with their photo.

When discussing the qualities he searches for in potential fellows, Dr. Dorsey said, "We see the fellows in their role as helpful, responsible, caring neighbors, which is almost what a citizen is."

The Greensboro site currently has eight fellows, while the Perry County site has six. The Pomona location has five fellows.

Health Partners Program

The health partners program launched in 2013 and provides care and social support to senior citizens in Greensboro. Fellows are partnered with seven to 10 seniors and both parties quickly reap the benefits of such transformational, genuine relationships.

Students work to build a mutually beneficial relationship with their seniors by providing them with stable companionship,



Top: The community center's renovated kitchen hosts cooking classes and community center programming for Greensboro citizens three times a week.

Middle left: Donnie Byrd, an avid community center participant, basks in the sunlight at the old Greensboro Hotel.

Middle right: The Greensboro Watchman provides the community with updates about the nonprofit, generating local support.

Bottom: Community members pose for a photo outside of the former Greensboro Hotel.



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Horseshoe Farm brings the G'boro Hotel building back to life ~ come and visit !

PROJECT HORSESHOE FARM

Dr. John A. Dorsey

Greensboro Watchman



day in and day out. Fellows accomplish this goal by taking their “health partners” to doctor’s appointments, spending quality time with them and encouraging healthy behaviors such as daily walks and involvement with Project Horseshoe Farm’s community center programs.

When discussing how the health partners program has changed her outlook on the nation’s health care system, Mackenzie Christensen, a senior fellow, said, “It has shown me that there are a lot of gaps in our health care system that we need to address and fix.”

Youth Program

The nonprofit’s youth program is run by fellows and interns under the leadership of Black Belt native and site director, LaShanda Richardson. This after-school program provides Greensboro children with a place to spend time growing both socially and academically. Project Horseshoe Farm picks participants up from their schools and brings them to the old Greensboro Hotel, where they spend an hour completing homework assignments and engaging in fun, educational activities. After that, they spend time playing interactive games, like pickleball or making arts and crafts.

Christensen said, “They’re really into cooking as well, even sometimes more than the adults.”

Community Center Program

Three days a week, Project Horseshoe Farm invites all community members to enjoy one another’s company over lunch and participate in group activities such as interactive games or meditation. The program averages 35 to 40 attendees, many of whom are eager to stay active and maintain positive social relationships.

“It’s a place here on main street in downtown Greensboro where everyone is welcome,” Assistant Director Sarah Hallmark said, grinning as she proudly surveyed the buzzing community center.

Participants may also earn points, known as horseshoes, by participating in activities like walking or cooking club. These points may be exchanged in their mock store for a variety of goods, such as personal hygiene items, socks or blankets once a month.

Additionally, to ensure that everyone who wants to attend can, the nonprofit offers free transportation for participants. Anyone needing a ride is picked up, either by the program’s van or a fellow or staff member’s personal vehicle.

As part of the program, Project Horseshoe Farm also has a workout facility available for all Greensboro citizens to use free of charge, as well as two pickleball courts and a ballroom space. For example, events like the nonprofit’s summer youth program and tai chi classes are held in the ballroom.



The nonprofit addresses the area’s lack of exercise equipment by providing community members with free access to workout machines.



Community center participants enjoy each other’s company after lunch.



The nonprofit’s mock store allows community center participants to earn points and exchange them for practical items.



Auburn University's Rural Studio partnered with the nonprofit to build three pods, or living spaces, closer to the community center.



This quaint home houses three women through the nonprofit's South Street Enhanced Independent Living Program.



Each pod features a bed, kitchen, full bathroom and screened-in porch.

Housing Program

In Greensboro, the South Street Enhanced Independent Living Program provides affordable housing and mental health support to women living with psychosocial challenges. This program began on the outskirts of the city in an old farmhouse on Horseshoe Bend, giving the nonprofit its name. After some of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the program was moved closer to the community center.

A partnership was formed with the Auburn University Rural Studio, an off-campus design-build program, to help the nonprofit build three different pods, or living spaces, two blocks away from the community center on South Street. Each pod features a kitchen, bathroom and a screened-in porch.

A small home also sits in front of the pods with enough room for three women to live in. In these spaces, women can live independently while receiving support from Project Horseshoe Farm fellows and staff members. Fellows provide residents with social support by helping them with essential activities like grocery shopping. They also spend quality time with the women and ensure that they receive mental and emotional care.

"I kept up with my doctor's appointments with Dr. Dorsey, and I'm better, much, much better," said Shirley Crockett, a program resident of five years. Crockett came to Project Horseshoe Farm after experiencing a mental health relapse in 2018. In need of a place to live after leaving the hospital, her doctor recommended the program.

Today, with the help of Project Horseshoe Farm, Crockett has made major progress toward her goal of increased independence and stability. She plans to move from the small house to the pods soon and hopes to eventually live on her own.

"I'm like the house mother; if anybody needs help with something, I'm the one that's helping them," Crockett said.

The Perry County and Pomona sites offer nursing home living options instead of the independent living housing program.



Housing program residents enjoy spending time together outside.



Left to right: Fellow Walker Ferry, Senior Fellow Mackenzie Christensen, Site Director LaShanda Richardson, Founder and Executive Director Dr. John Dorsey, Assistant Director Sarah Hallmark

which offer support and resources, including the local Emergency Management Agency (EMA) office and the local extension office.

“They come in and they may provide wellness classes or cooking classes to the after-school program and community center program,” Richardson said when discussing the services the local extension office provides.

Furthermore, the Hale County Hospital partners with the nonprofit and plays a major role in ensuring that Project Horseshoe Farm participants receive quality care. Dr. Dorsey emphasizes what a blessing it is to have such a strong

Community Impact

Today, the Greensboro and Perry County sites directly serve more than 250 individuals in search of social and mental health support. However, there are many more indirectly impacted by Project Horseshoe Farm and its tireless efforts to strengthen the communities in which it operates.

The nonprofit has provided over 250,000 hours of transformative learning to more than 200 fellows from across the country since launching its fellowship program in 2009. Whether pursuing a medical or graduate social work degree, each fellow leaves Greensboro with a greater understanding of rural health care needs.

Donnie Byrd, a loyal community center program attendee, animatedly described what the program means to him and how it has impacted his life. He said, “This is one of the greatest programs I can be a part of. Dr. Dorsey is doing a great thing here!”

Community Support

The Greensboro community and its leaders have played an influential role in Project Horseshoe Farm’s success. Community members’ welcoming spirits and willingness to support the nonprofit have provided opportunities for the project to continue to expand and elevate its services.

“Mayor Washington has been a wonderful ally and just a person who’s really welcomed me into the community,” Dr. Dorsey said.

Project Horseshoe Farm also has several local partners

hospital and health system for Horseshoe Farm participants and for the whole community.

“If you’re looking for personal, good care, you can find it at the Hale County Hospital,” Hallmark said.

One former fellow, Dr. Meghan Bonds, has stuck around Greensboro and continues to make a positive impact on the quality of Black Belt health care. As a Hale County Hospital physician, she plays an influential role in the recruitment of exceptional doctors to the area.

The Future of Project Horseshoe Farm

The future of Project Horseshoe Farm is bright. The community health nonprofit continues to inspire communities looking to imitate the project while attracting potential medical students and top-notch physicians to rural Alabama.

However, Dr. Dorsey believes that the project has only just begun to make the impact it has the potential to, stating, “I see community-based work as long-term work, and I think we’re in the very early stages, even in Greensboro where we’ve been doing this work since 2007.”

Yet, it is clear that Project Horseshoe Farm is headed in the right direction. The program has already touched the lives of many Greensboro, Perry County and Pomona citizens, as well as over 200 fellows.

“I think that part of me was really always looking for a smaller and more personal place to live and a more personal place to practice,” Dr. Dorsey said.

Luckily, he has found exactly that. ■

A Community-Building Approach to Health Equity



Erin Hackenmueller • Branding & Communications Development Manager
Center for Economic Development at The University of Alabama

Providing access to affordable, quality health care has long been a challenge for Alabama leaders. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and intensified these challenges for municipal leaders and health care workers.

The Equitable Neighborhoods Initiative (ENI), a project led by The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development (UACED), is helping communities tackle these challenges. ENI aims to build community leaders' capacity to address current and future health and quality of life challenges.

Supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Alabama Department of Public Health, ENI will work with 20 communities in the state over three years with a total budget of \$7.8 million. ENI aims to help as many people as possible. The program works with communities that were not typically prioritized in the past.

ENI partner communities include Bayou La Batre, Blountsville, Camp Hill, Coden, Collinsville, Crossville, Dadeville, Fayette, Goodwater, Guin, Haleyville, Hobson City, Kilpatrick, LaFayette, the Ma-Chis Lower Creek Indian Tribe of Alabama, Midway, the MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians, Pittsview, Prichard and Sulligent.

Community-based, people-first model

UACED adopts an asset-based approach to community development, viewing a community's greatest asset as its people. Through ENI, UACED invests in Alabama's people, taking a unique community-building approach to health equity.

One key to ENI's success is community involvement in shaping the program. UACED values that communities have autonomy in decisions and programs that impact them. This led to the hiring of "boots on the ground" community liaisons in each partner community. Community liaisons are deeply rooted in the communities and trusted by their neighbors. Trust is a foundation of successful community work, especially when dealing with underserved communities and sensitive topics like health care.

ENI partner communities tailor programming and information to their community needs. For example, access to dental care was identified as an issue in Collinsville. Community Liaison Greg Sarabia provided information and resources for dental care in English and Spanish at local health fairs.

The ENI team gathered in Montevallo for a quarterly planning retreat in February.



WAYS ENI IS TACKLING HEALTH EQUITY:

Building community capacity through Advisory Groups and Youth Community Councils

ENI's community liaisons are building local teams made up of everyone from youth to retirees to tailor programs to community needs. Together, these teams are working to improve health outcomes for their towns. ENI team members take the assets that already exist in communities, identify what is needed and adapt the programming to those needs.

First, Advisory Groups (AGs) are crucial in guiding ENI to leverage assets and meet the needs of the local community. AG members advise on addressing COVID-19 and other health issues.

ENI has established an amazing network of partners across the state through the AGs. ENI Community Liaisons regularly report that they have connected people in their communities who have never met but do similar work. ENI engaged with 400 unique partners in 2023.

Second, engaging youth is a priority of ENI. Youth Community Councils (YCCs) are groups of high school students dedicated to improving community health and quality of life. YCC members develop plans to inspire healthy living for their generation.

ENI engaged the YCCs through regional youth summits. The students interacted with other young people and shared ideas to tackle health equity issues with community leaders.

These summits have already inspired action. Sulligent students are working with their community liaison to provide hygiene kits to every student in their school. Guin YCC members are working with administrators to address issues such as mental health and substance use. In Prichard, students are working with their city council to create a citywide youth advisory council, ensuring the next generation's voice is heard beyond ENI.

"I was struck by the creativity, innovation and passion demonstrated by the young participants at the ENI youth summits," said Dr. Arturo Menefee, UACED's interim executive director and ENI's project leader. "They showcased a diverse array of talents and provided compelling ideas for tackling health equity issues in their communities."

Within five youth summits, ENI engaged with 17 YCCs, 15 high schools and over 250 students.



Greg Sarabia attends a local health fair.



Dadeville Community Liaison Teneeshia Johnson and Camp Host Community Liaison Bianca Moss work with students on their pitch.



Members of the Haleyville YCC presented a pitch on connecting students with mental health resources.

Providing access to information through health resource directories

Access to information is a crucial aspect of providing equitable health care. ENI compiled state and county-level resources via health resource directories. These resources are especially important for populations who have limited mobility, transportation or internet access. They ensure that everyone has access to essential health services and information. These are living documents and can be adapted as needed.

Working toward shared goals through health equity planning

Action plans help communities set shared goals and work toward actionable outcomes. Each ENI community will create a health equity action plan. These plans focus on identifying major community health issues, goals and action steps. ENI health equity plans identify people and organizations that will help accomplish each goal. During planning meetings, communities develop SMART goals and timelines. These action plans will assist ENI in addressing community health concerns.

Mental health first aid

Mental health has been identified as an issue among youth and adults in every one of ENI’s partner communities. To address this issue, ENI is partnering with VitAL Alabama to provide Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training. Much like

physical first aid, MHFA trains people to act in emergencies to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. MHFA is a national, peer-reviewed program.

“To get people the help that they need is not only going to help that individual, but help those communities as a whole,” said Dr. Jessica Hoggle, MHFA educator with VitAL. “Because if we have individuals that are mentally well and healthy, we’re going to have communities that are more mentally healthy as well.”

The team expects more than 400 first responders, community leaders and concerned neighbors to participate as a result of ENI. Even some of the students in the YCCs have participated! ENI plans to sponsor training to certify up to 32 people throughout the partner communities to host future trainings. This will set the groundwork for a network of MHFA trainers across Alabama.

Healing zones

Healing zones are outdoor spaces that support physical, mental, emotional and social health.

“The underserved small communities were hit extremely hard by COVID,” Dr. Menefee said. “We wanted to find a place for them to be outside to move around that will have a positive impact on their physical health but would also help with their mental health.”

COVID-19 impacts people with underlying health





Pictured are AG members from Crossville and Kilpatrick on a community feedback day.

issues. The healing zones will provide a safe walking space to address health issues through activity. The pandemic made gathering safely challenging, so the healing zones offer a way for community members to gather outdoors. Partnering with landscape architects and the UA Sculpture Program, the ENI team is creating attractive, inviting and accessible healing zones. They will feature walking paths, exercise stations, play areas, bike racks, benches, picnic tables and raised garden beds.

SUSTAINING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORK

At a certain point in any community-based project, people ask “What’s next?” Sustaining ENI has been in the plans from the beginning. ENI partner communities are working on strategies to ensure the program can continue for years to come. These plans will be as unique as ENI communities, but will generally take one of two pathways:

1. Apply for a 501(c)3 to make ENI a nonprofit in their community.
2. Make ENI a program within an already established nonprofit in their community.

The ENI leadership team is helping partner communities navigate this process. ENI is providing guidance on creating a nonprofit, grant writing and fundraising.

HOW CAN MUNICIPAL LEADERS TACKLE HEALTH EQUITY?

Many community development resources offered to ENI partners are accessible to the public. Visit www.enialabama.org/resources to find leadership curricula, community-development training documents and helpful videos. These resources will help communities across the state and beyond for years to come. ■

For more information about the Equitable Neighborhoods Program and to access the resources available through ENI, scan the QR code.



Alabama’s Plan for Mental Health Wellness and Recovery

Kimberly Boswell • Commissioner • Alabama Department of Mental Health

Over the last two years, the Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH), working alongside Alabama lawmakers and state and community partners, has made significant strides toward fundamentally transforming mental health services in Alabama – expanding and strengthening every component of the Alabama Crisis System of Care. By giving Alabamians “someone to call, someone to respond and somewhere to go” during a mental health crisis, the Alabama System of Care saves lives and reduces the strain on the state’s law enforcement and emergency departments.

Recent Successes

As an entry point into the Alabama Crisis System of Care, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline gives individuals “someone to call” when they, a family member or loved one is in a mental health, substance use or suicidal crisis. From the roll-out of 988 in July 2022 through December 2023, call centers in Alabama responded to almost 69,000 contacts. With the recent addition of a call center in Montgomery, the state now has four locations responding to 988 calls, including one center that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Mobile Crisis Teams (MCTs) are another critical piece of the Alabama Crisis System of Care, linking individuals directly to services. In Alabama, 11 providers operate 14 MCTs strategically located to provide 24/7 services in the state’s 55 rural counties. The teams – which assisted some 2,440 adults in 2023 – are trained to provide triage, assessment, de-escalation, peer support, coordination with medical services, supportive counseling, crisis planning and follow-up.

Teams may operate independently or in coordination with law enforcement.

By working with the existing MCTs on complying with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) “National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis Care,” ADMH has enabled current and future MCT providers to bill Medicaid for their services, thereby encouraging continued growth and ensuring financial sustainability.

Crisis centers – the third component of the Alabama Crisis System of Care – offer around-the-clock care 365 days a year, giving individuals “somewhere to go” during a behavioral health crisis. From May 2021 through December 2023, these centers performed almost 8,300 evaluations, with a mere 3.22 percent rate of readmission within 30

Call 988
Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

For anyone in a crisis of **mental health, substance use, or having thoughts of self-harm**: a trained crisis counselor is ready to speak with you. There's no shame in sharing how you feel. It's private and available 24/7.

ADMH
Alabama Department of Mental Health

- 1 Reach Out**
Call, Text, or Chat
Dial or text 988 from your phone or visit 988lifeline.org
- 2 Connect**
Speak to a trained crisis counselor
- 3 Get Help**
You'll be connected to local resources

days. Services include assessment, temporary and extended observation, linkage to resources and collaboration with specialty providers for co-occurring disorders. With the addition of new centers in Birmingham and Tuscaloosa in 2023, the state now has five crisis centers.

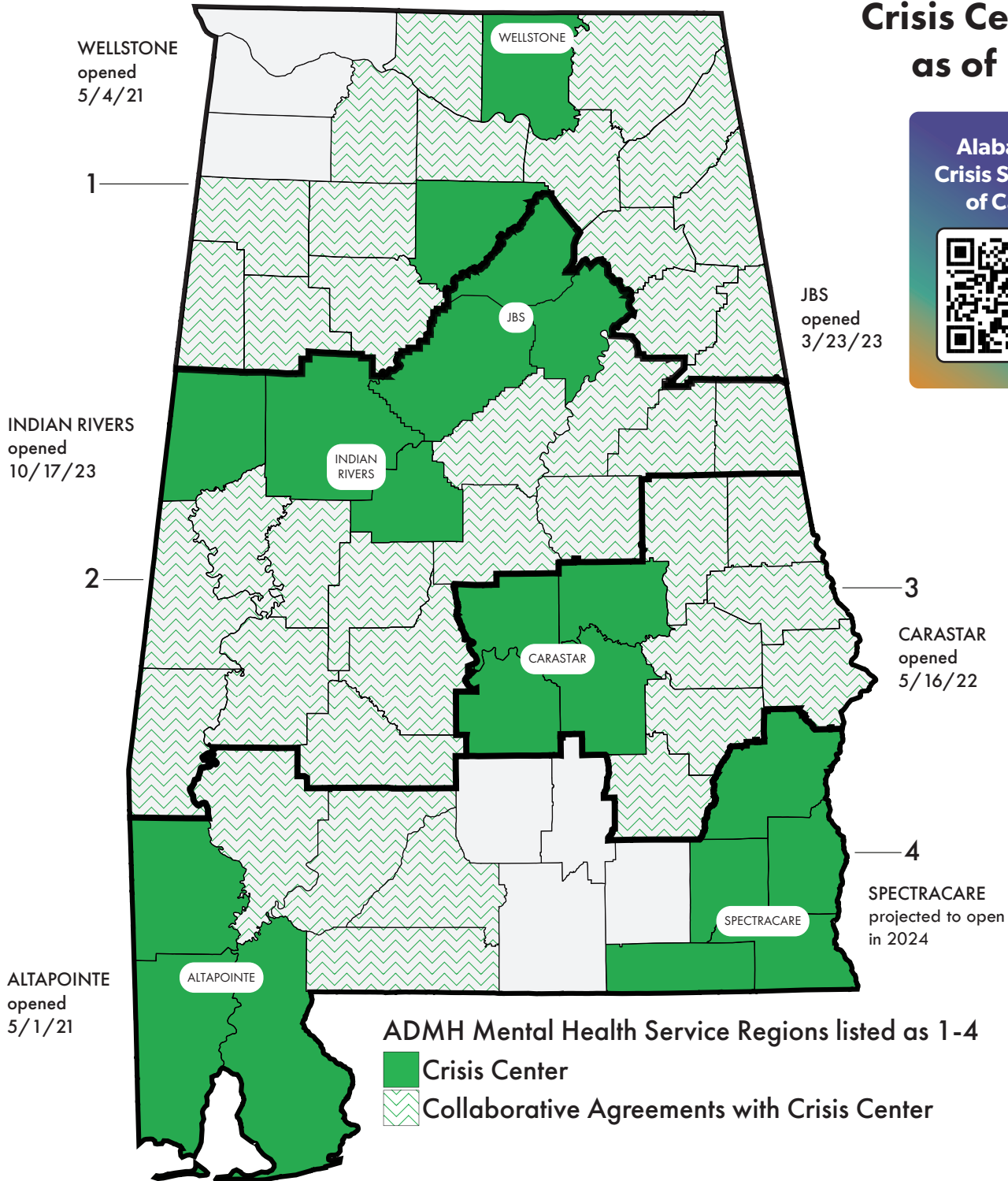
Additionally, there has been noteworthy progress in mental health services for Alabama's youngest citizens, who are also the most vulnerable. Working in collaboration with the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) and

Alabama's local education agencies (LEAs), ADMH and its providers offer School-Based Mental Health Services (SBMH) to ensure that both general and special education students have access to high-quality mental health prevention, early intervention and treatment services in the school setting. This program has been offered since 2010 and continues to expand year after year.

To assure children and adolescents can access necessary services, ADMH also has partnered with the Pediatric

Crisis Centers as of FY23

Alabama Crisis System of Care

Access to Telemental Health Services (PATHS) program at Children’s of Alabama. This program builds capacity for rural primary care providers across the state who diagnose, treat and manage mild to moderate behavioral health conditions in children and adolescents. As of late 2023, there were 101 primary care practices and over 399 individual providers participating in PATHS.

Furthermore, ADMH is working to expand children’s services through the creation of a 24-bed, 12,000-square-foot pediatric unit at Huntsville’s Wellstone Emergency Services. The facility will open its doors in fall 2024 and offer Alabama families another inpatient care option in the state. The new center will provide stabilization, diagnosis, treatment and follow-up care for children and adolescents experiencing mental health-related crises.

Ongoing Challenges

Although the growth and expansion of crisis services has improved access to care for those who are willing to go into treatment, there remains a considerable shortage of civil commitment beds for those who pose a danger to themselves or others. These individuals may be arrested or refuse treatment before access to a bed is available. Future efforts will focus on determining a sustainable funding source to increase availability of these beds.

To address the challenges related to staffing shortages in the state’s behavioral health care workforce, ADMH joined with the Alabama Community College System to develop a certificate program for mental health technicians. The program, offered at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, is designed to assure that direct-care staff enter the workplace equipped with the tools for success and longevity. Course topics include safety, confidentiality, ethics, basic patient care, crisis intervention, medication management, vital signs, patient environments and cultural sensitivity. The lab portion of the self-paced, hybrid course gives students an opportunity to apply their lessons through a series of real-world scenarios.

The Future

In the immediate future and beyond, ADMH’s goal is to build and capitalize on the momentum of the past few years by continuing to strengthen and expand every aspect of the Alabama Crisis System of Care. Through a one-year planning grant received from SAMHSA in March 2023, ADMH has been assisting Alabama’s Community Mental Health Centers in transitioning to the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics’ (CCBHC) business model of service delivery.

The CCBHC model is person-centered and is designed to increase same-day access to behavioral health services, including crisis services, that respond to local community needs; incorporate evidence-based practices; and establish care coordination to help people navigate behavioral health care, physical health care and social services. By moving the state’s mental health centers to this model, ADMH will ensure statewide expansion of and access to mental health care for all Alabamians.

The next step in the process involves applying for a four-year CCBHC Demonstration Grant through SAMHSA. If approved for the highly competitive grant, the state will receive federal support for the next four years, funding CCBHC’s through 2028.

As we write the next chapter of mental health services in Alabama, it is important to acknowledge the contributions of our state’s leadership and the hard work and dedication of ADMH staff and its partners and providers. We are grateful for the support from our governor and the Alabama Legislature, and the support from our city and county leadership and law enforcement.

Commitment to the shared mission is critical to building a behavioral health care system that saves lives, supports our friends and families and ensures the success of our state. ■

Download the CONNECT ALABAMA App

Connect Alabama, a behavioral health services and treatment finder application, provides individuals instant access to education, information and services related to substance use, mental health, and prevention.

Download for
Apple devices



Download for
Android devices



Scan to learn
more about
Connect
Alabama





ADVA Commissioner Kent Davis Provides Update on Veterans' Resources

To my fellow community leaders,

First, thank you for all that you do in your towns, cities and communities. Alabama's greatest strength frequently begins at the local level, and it requires adequate and effective leadership to best create a thriving community for the great people who call this state home.

I think we can agree, veterans, more than anyone in our communities, often encompass the heartbeat, pride and passion that we should all strive to achieve. Though these veterans no longer serve in military uniform, they continue to serve in their communities. When you need to call on someone, a veteran is frequently there to answer the call of service.

At the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA), we are here to ensure that those same veterans receive the service and care that they need as well. You may be familiar with the programs and benefits offered through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA), which are great resources, but let me clarify that ADVA is not the USDVA. However, we do offer a handful of complementary programs and benefits. A great example of this partnership is our State Veterans Home Program, which offers veterans in Alabama a long-term health care option. USDVA serves veterans through short-term health services, including VA hospitals and clinics.

The State Veterans Home Program features four skilled-nursing facilities – located in Huntsville, Pell City, Alexander City and Bay Minette – that provide an affordable living option for hundreds of veterans who need long-term health care. Later this year, we are looking forward to opening a fifth facility, which will operate in the Wiregrass region in Enterprise. It will welcome home 174 veterans and provide jobs for about 200 members of the community.

While the Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie G. Adkins State Veterans Home has been the latest opportunity to partner with local municipalities, it is just one way ADVA is working with communities to provide care for veterans across the state. Our newest, health care-focused mission at ADVA, within the Office of Outreach and Engagement, focuses on veterans' overall well-being. For several years we have emphasized veterans suicide prevention, even creating a veterans' well-being program manager position in 2021 and have established a statewide veterans' suicide prevention initiative called Alabama's Challenge. This initiative is aimed at creating an impactful, long-term outcome across the state as we continue fighting the stigma with mental illness.

A primary way we've worked to create this outcome, which many of you may be familiar with, is through town halls and resource fairs hosted under the Alabama's Challenge banner. Some of you have partnered with us for these events,

The Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie G. Adkins State Veterans Home in Enterprise is scheduled to open in fall 2024.



which we remain incredibly grateful for, and others of you will likely hear from us soon.

Since February 2022, the Partners of Alabama’s Challenge has hosted events in Birmingham/Hoover, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Auburn, Tuscaloosa, Dothan, Enterprise and Fairhope. The purpose of these events is to connect with veterans and provide information and knowledge about suicide prevention, while also providing care and offering available resources and options to deal with PTSD, mental illness and other related concerns.

Within suicide prevention, we also have an annual campaign called Operation We Remember, which is an opportunity to remember and honor the Alabama veterans who lost their lives to suicide. I am sure many of you have seen the display of American flags in September – Suicide Prevention Awareness Month – on the campuses of colleges and universities across the state. Along with the physical presence of the flags, we also promote *VetsForHope.com* as a one-stop online resource for all materials and resources related to suicide prevention.

As we continue to work to decrease Alabama’s veterans suicide rate, we are also taking a proactive approach toward addressing veterans’ well-being by introducing resilience training and discussions. In 2023, we launched Operation Resilience, hosting events in Montgomery and Hoover, which provided an opportunity for veterans to gather and learn or discuss the importance of establishing and maintaining a resilient lifestyle.

Operation Resilience created an additional chance for veterans to grow and strengthen from peer-to-peer interaction, and birthed



The Partners of Alabama’s Challenge gathered Christmas shoppers at Riverchase Galleria in Hoover to learn about veterans’ suicide and the prevention measures being taken across the state.



ADVA is a continued supporter of Operation Iron Ruck, a veterans’ suicide prevention effort between student veterans at Alabama and Auburn.

Central Alabama Community College in Talladega welcomed community members to honor and remember Alabama veterans who lost their lives to suicide as part of Operation We Remember.



another ADVA campaign – Service Never Stops, which provides the acknowledgement of purpose by encouraging community service. We most recently partnered with the Montgomery Biscuits for their Military Appreciation Night to host a resource fair on the main concourse, while also conveying to veterans the importance of continued service and finding their callings within the community.

As ADVA has continued redefining its efforts for assisting Alabama’s 400,000 veterans through our own programs, the Office of Outreach and Engagement continues actively working to establish external partnerships under the same goal.

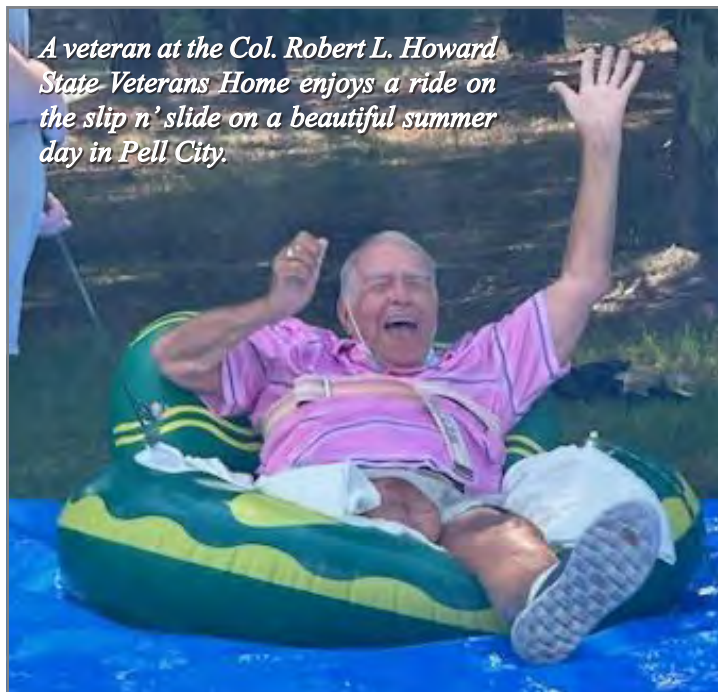
ADVA has partnered with agencies and organizations across the board. We have signed memorandums of understanding with the Emory Healthcare Veterans Program, National Veterans Legal Services Program, and the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, formally acknowledging our intention and promise to promote the services that each provide to Alabama’s veterans.

At the state level, we have partnered with the Alabama Community College System and participated in 30 resource workshops across the state, which are tailored to military active-duty, guardsmen, reservists, retirees, veterans and their dependents as an informational opportunity to learn more about local services and programs. We have also aligned with the Auburn Student Veterans Association and University of Alabama Campus Veterans Association to show our support for Operation Iron Ruck – a three-day, 151-mile ruck march from one

campus to the other during the week of the Iron Bowl.

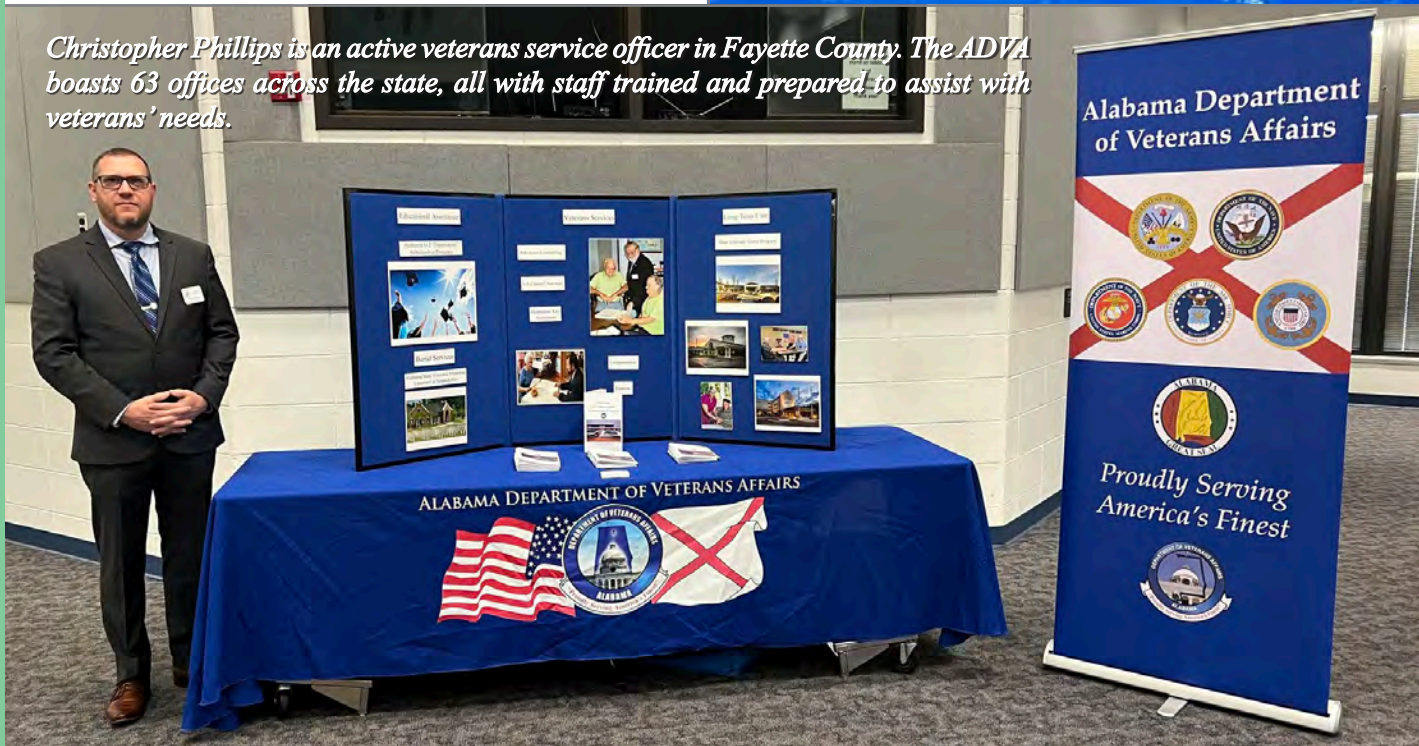
ADVA also works with USDVA daily, and we have partnered together for several events, including the Montgomery Veterans Experience Action Center. I also met with USDVA Secretary Denis McDonough during the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System’s 100th anniversary celebration of its east campus hospital to discuss how the federal government can best serve Alabama’s veterans.

To say it directly, connectedness is key to effectively and efficiently serving our nation’s heroes. It is about knowing



A veteran at the Col. Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home enjoys a ride on the slip n’ slide on a beautiful summer day in Pell City.


Christopher Phillips is an active veterans service officer in Fayette County. The ADVA boasts 63 offices across the state, all with staff trained and prepared to assist with veterans’ needs.



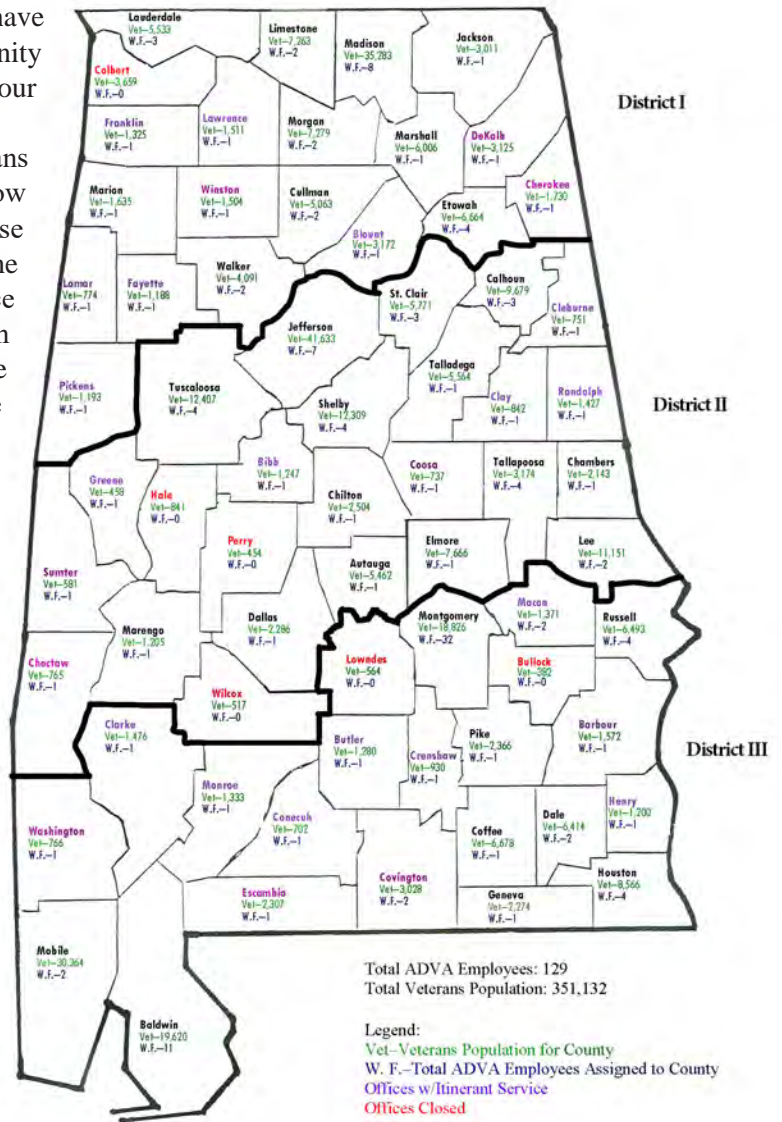
and trusting one another and knowing that you both have each other's backs. Saying that, within each community across the state, this connectedness should start with our veterans' service offices.

ADVA has 63 offices across Alabama and our veterans service officers are men and women who you should know and rely on when services and care are needed. These members of the ADVA team are truly the boots on the ground. They are the ones providing hands-on assistance in submitting applications for USDVA compensation and pension claims and assisting with all other state and federal veterans benefits and services. They are the experts in the field. They are the men and women who veterans in your communities should call first as their military service comes to an end and should continue calling with any questions regarding benefits and available programs.

Our mission at ADVA is to promote awareness and assist veterans, their families and survivors to receive any and all benefits to which they may be entitled under existing or future laws. This is the service Alabama's 400,000 veterans have earned, but it is a service we must all work together collectively to ensure they receive.



W. Kent Davis
Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)
Former Major, U.S. Army
Commissioner, Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs



Alabama Veterans Service Office Contacts:

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District I Manager

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Tim.Edgil@va.alabama.gov

Counties: Blount, Cherokee, Colbert, Cullman, Dekalb, Etowah, Fayette, Franklin, Jackson, Lamar, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Madison, Marion, Marshall, Morgan, Pickens, Walker, Winston

Eric Ervin
District II Manager

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Counties: Autauga, Bibb, Calhoun, Chambers, Chilton, Choctaw, Clay, Cleburne, Coosa, Dallas, Elmore, Greene, Hale, Jefferson, Lee, Marengo, Perry, Randolph, Shelby, St. Clair, Sumter, Talladega, Tallapoosa, Tuscaloosa, Wilcox

Rhonda K. Jackson
District III Manager

(251) 275-3292

Rhonda.Jackson@va.alabama.gov

Counties: Baldwin, Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Clarke, Coffee, Conecuh, Covington, Crenshaw, Dale, Escambia, Geneva, Henry, Lowndes, Macon, Mobile, Monroe, Montgomery, Pike, Russell, Washington

See the online interactive map on the ADVA website (works best on full size screens). You can click on your county for more detailed information, including the address and operating hours of local offices: <https://va.alabama.gov/serviceofficer/>.



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By Rob Johnston, Director of Legal Services, ALM

Public Hearings: What are They all About?

Public hearings are not a part of a municipal official’s everyday routine. You know that they exist. You know you will likely need to have one at some point, but when the time comes, you may realize there are a few memory gaps to fill. Municipal officials and clerks frequently ask about the “when” and the “how” of public hearings. In this article, we will walk you through the public hearing steps.

What is the Difference between a Council Meeting and a Public Hearing?

While most council meetings are open to the public, it is important to understand the difference between a public meeting and a public hearing. Public hearings are specifically set up to allow the public to give comments and express opinions and concerns on matters related to the purpose of the hearing. In other words, a public hearing is an official proceeding during which the public is afforded the right to be heard on a specific issue.

When are Public Hearings Required?

Some public hearings are required by law. For example, Alabama law requires that a public hearing must be held before passing or amending any zoning ordinance. See Sections 11-52-77 and 11-52-78, Code of Alabama 1975.

Another example of a mandated public hearing relates to increases in ad valorem taxes. Subsection (f) of Section 217, as amended by Amendment 373 of the Alabama Constitution of 1901, provides that a municipality may, under certain conditions, increase ad valorem taxes after a public hearing.

For municipalities following the weed abatement process in Sections 11-67-60 through 11-67-67, Code of Alabama 1975, notice of a public hearing is required after the resolution is passed.

Section 23-4-2, Code of Alabama 1975, provides that whenever the governing body of a municipality proposes to vacate a public street, alley, highway or portion thereof, the governing body shall schedule a public hearing prior to taking final action.

There are circumstances, however, where even if the law does not require a public hearing, a governmental body may want to conduct a hearing to gauge public opinion on a matter before it takes any formal action. For example, state law does not require a municipality to hold a public hearing before issuing an alcoholic beverage license, but it is certainly prudent for a municipality to hold a hearing and take steps to protect an applicant’s due process rights in the event of a denial of a license. In instances like this,



public input and testimony may help support the basis for the council’s decision.

Notice and Location

Consideration should be given as to the location for a hearing before giving notice to the public. Space, furnishings and equipment needs also should be assessed, keeping in mind the nature of the public hearing and expected attendance of people who are likely to provide comment.

Regardless of the reason for the public hearing, the public must be put on notice of the hearing. While particular statutory requirements may come into play in the case of a

mandated public hearing, all notices should, at a minimum, provide the date, time and location of the hearing as well as a brief statement of the purpose of the hearing.

Other considerations for the notice include:

- A name and contact information for additional information;
- Information on where copies of relevant documents can be reviewed or obtained;
- Information on how individuals or groups may testify during the hearing, including any applicable rules for the public hearing (if they are available).

Establishing “Ground Rules”

To run a smooth public hearing and cut down on disorder, it is advised that the municipal council or other governmental entity establish ground rules that balance the public’s right to be heard with the need to maintain order. These rules may be set up in writing and provided in advance of the public hearing, or they may be done verbally at the beginning of the public hearing. Regardless of whether they are provided in advance, the rules should be publicly announced at the beginning of the public hearing and may need to be repeated during the hearing if it is clear that they are not being followed or there appears to be some confusion. As with any set of rules, they are only effective if they are enforced consistently and fairly.

The rules must respect the public’s first amendment right to free speech given that a public hearing is considered a designated public forum. As such, any rules or restrictions should only apply to time, place, and manner of the speech as opposed to the content of the speech. In a public forum the government may impose reasonable restrictions on the **time, place or manner** of protected speech, provided the restrictions “are justified without reference to the content of the regulated speech, that they are narrowly tailored to serve a significant governmental interest, and that they leave open ample alternative channels for communication of the information.” See *Ward v. Rock Against Racism*, 491 U.S. 781,791 (1989) (quoting *Clark v. Community for Creative Non-Violence*, 468 U.S. 288, 293 [1984]).

With this general principal in mind, the following is a suggested framework, including some suggested ground rules for conducting public hearings:

1. **Opening Comments.** The person responsible for conducting the public hearing, such as the chair of the planning commission for zoning public hearings, should welcome the public and state the purpose of the hearing. It might also be good to acknowledge the manner in which notice was provided for the hearing and state that everyone wishing to speak on the subject at issue will be given the opportunity to speak. The hearing procedures should be stated clearly, and the public should be put

on notice that any failure to follow the procedures that results in disruption will lead to them being asked to leave the hearing immediately. For example, if there is a time limit on speaking or a limit on the number of people who may speak on either side of an issue, it should be made clear to attendees up front that they will be cut off and asked to stop speaking in order to continue the rest of the hearing. This will help the public understand, and hopefully, follow the procedures established.

2. **Sign-up Sheets.** A common practice for any public hearing is to require individuals or groups to sign up if they wish to speak. A sign-up sheet should be easily accessible to attendees at the public hearing, and announcements should be made before and during the hearing that if people want to speak, they must sign up to do so. Also, keep in mind that people with disabilities must be accommodated with assistance in both signing up to speak and speaking, if necessary.

To maintain fairness and efficiency, testimony and comments should be taken in the order listed on the sign-up sheet. This also prevents people from bunching up or crowding at the lectern where people are speaking. It is also recommended, unless the circumstances warrant otherwise, that people who wish to speak multiple times must wait until everyone has had their chance to speak initially. Whatever approach is taken, it should be enforced consistently and fairly.

3. **Limiting Subject Matter.** The prohibition against regulating the “content” of speech doesn’t mean that the rules cannot limit speakers at the public forum to the subject matter of the public hearing. The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals has held that limiting testimony or remarks to a particular subject matter or topic does not violate the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. See *Jones v. Heyman*, 888 F.2d 1328 (11th Cir. 1989). Therefore, if a public hearing involves the potential rezoning of an area of land from residential to commercial, it would be appropriate to limit comments to this subject. It is important to note, however, that both positive and negative comments on the subject matter at hand must be permitted. See e.g. *Madison Joint Sch. Dist. No. 8 v. Wisconsin Employment Relations Comm’n*, 429 U.S. 167 (1976) (prohibiting negative comments violates the First Amendment).

4. **Time Limits and Repetitive Comments.** Reasonable time limits for an individual’s comments during a public hearing may be imposed, but there is not a one-size-fits-all as to the amount of time. This should be looked at carefully depending on the subject matter of the hearing.

Limiting oral comments encourages witnesses to be focused and direct. While time limits of three to five minutes during public comment at a public meeting might be appropriate, when there are specific parties in interest at a public hearing (such as a land use applicant) time limits may need to be considerably longer. A party in interest is one whose property rights are directly affected by or in relation to the issue. Therefore, limiting their time to speak at a public hearing should be imposed only if absolutely necessary. For those who are not a party in interest, three to five minutes may be more acceptable depending on the subject matter and nature of the hearing. If it appears many wish to speak, another option is to limit the time for individuals to speak but allow for written comments to be submitted in addition to their oral comments.

What about limiting the number of times an individual may speak? Again, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of a public hearing is to allow the public to speak and to gather input and comments from the public. Therefore, care should be taken before restricting the number of times an individual may address the body. What is reasonable will depend on the subject matter and whether the individual is simply repeating the same comments over and over rather than adding additional comments. Certainly, if an individual is making repetitive comments, that are disruptive and are preventing the hearing from progressing in an orderly fashion, then that person may be interrupted and asked to stop.

- 5. Disorderly People.** Perhaps the most challenging aspect of a public hearing, especially if the issue is a contentious one, is dealing with disorderly people who refuse to cede the floor when asked or who interrupt and disturb other people who are providing comments. There are numerous ways a person may **disrupt** a public hearing. They may speak too long, be unduly repetitious or get completely off the subject matter and start discussing irrelevancies. No one has the right to disrupt a public proceeding (meeting or hearing) and interfere with the business at hand. While an individual has a First Amendment right to free speech and expression, that right does not extend to disrupting proceedings in a manner that prevents a governmental entity from being able to proceed in an orderly manner. In fact, the governmental body may need to act to maintain order so that the rights of others, to speak on the matter at hand, are protected. See *White v. City of Norwalk*, 900 F.2d 1421 (9th Cir. 1990).

A good practice is for the person responsible for conducting the public hearing to be clear with anyone who interrupts, refuses to cede the floor or insists on making irrelevant

and/or repetitive comments that they must come to order or leave the hearing. If a person is asked to stop their behavior and refuses to do so, he or she should be directed to exit the hearing and, if necessary, be escorted out by a police officer.

- 6. Recesses/Continuances.** Depending on the circumstances and subject matter of the public hearing, it may become necessary at some point during a public hearing to take a recess or even call for a continuation of the hearing at another date and time. In the case of a recess, it should be made clear to everyone in attendance at the public hearing the length of the recess and when it will reconvene. The hearing should not reconvene until the time announced.

If a public hearing has gone on longer than anticipated due to the number of people who wish to be heard or the length of their comments, it may be necessary to continue the hearing to another date and time. It is rarely advisable to put an absolute time limit on a public hearing because this could frustrate the purpose of the hearing if people are prevented from being heard. It is certainly acceptable, however, to place a time limit at which a continuation will be called. Should a continuance be necessary, a date, time and location should be announced before suspending the hearing. While a second notice is not specifically required by law, it is always a good practice to formally re-notice the continuation of the public hearing in the same manner as the notice for the underlying hearing.

- 7. Closing the Meeting.** A public hearing is concluded when all attendees who wish to comment have been given the opportunity to do so. Generally, there is no vote or action taken at the close of the hearing, and the person responsible for conducting the hearing simply calls it to a close. If the public is going to be allowed to submit written comments, it should be announced how long those comments will be accepted and where they should be turned in. It is appropriate to thank the attendees for attending and providing comments as well as explaining the steps the governmental entity will take to use the information gathered.

Conclusion

Public hearings are set up to allow the public to give comments and express opinions and concerns on matters related to the hearing's purpose. Public input may be helpful in supporting the basis for the council's decision. Your municipal attorney will be helpful in navigating through the public hearing process. Please do not hesitate to reach out to the League's Legal Department at 334-262-2566 so that we can also assist you. ■



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NLC's Strong Southern Communities Initiative: Helping Alabama Cities Leverage Federal Funding and Build Capacity

Denise Belser • Director of Pathways and Funding • NLC
Marva Smith, Ph.D. • Contractor and State Navigator for Alabama • NLC

In many communities, especially in the southern Black Belt region, decades of underinvestment in federal workforce development programs, disaster mitigation and federal food programs leaves too many families hungry, vulnerable to extreme weather, in underperforming schools and struggling to make ends meet. However, there is a resource for municipal leaders facing these challenges every day.

To support city-led solutions and improve family outcomes, the National League of Cities (NLC) launched the Strong Southern Communities Initiative (SSCI) offering practical help and advice to municipal leaders in **Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi**. Through financial support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, SSCI specializes in assisting small, high-need communities through technical assistance, grant funding, access to resources and a peer learning network.

A Holistic Approach to Supporting Local Priorities

SSCI uses a data-driven approach to understand the challenges of a community as part of a broader ecosystem that better serves children and families. Utilizing the results of a data assessment and the voice of municipal leaders, SSCI offers customized technical assistance to local leaders to

develop local action plans, knowing capacity and resources are constant barriers for many communities in the South. Through a coaching and peer learning model, city leaders can identify specific conditions of wellbeing they seek to address in their communities.

The NLC Equity Dashboard can look at disparities in health, education, workforce and housing between census



CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

tracks using city-level data for demographics such as age ranges, ethnicity and education. An assessment of needs for a community produces a data narrative which is then used to support the case for federal investment in a community. The narrative provides indicator-level data specific to the census track and begins to tell the story of the underemployed parent, the unemployed youth and the under resourced community. Data provides the numbers behind the narrative and SSCI provides the link to connect cities to funding to mitigate these disparities.

Securing Funding to Support Thriving Communities

SSCI has achieved success in assisting cities secure grants with continuous technical assistance from application to submission and beyond. The city of Tuskegee, Alabama was awarded a \$2,500 microgrant in 2022 through SSCI. The awarded microgrant led them to establish a community-facing coalition to improve first through third grade reading comprehension skills. This innovative team includes the city of Tuskegee's mayor's office, Macon County Schools, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee Institute High School's Class of 1974's Read to Me Program, former educators, community organizations and citizens. The funds from the microgrant support learning activities and transportation, while providing



RESEARCH TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES



DEVELOP GRANT SUMMARY



REVIEW GRANT ELIGIBILITY/PROJECT ALIGNMENT



ASSIST WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF GRANT PROPOSALS, BUDGETS, AND OTHER APPLICATION MATERIALS



REVIEW APPLICATIONS TO ENSURE THEY ARE COMPLETE AND MEET ALL SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS



SUPPORT CITIES WITH GRANT PORTAL REGISTRATION (GRANTS.GOV, SAMS, JUSTGRANTS, FEMAGO, ETC.)

SSCI aims to help municipalities through the federal grant navigation process.



a public partnership engagement paradigm. SSCI has experience assisting even some of the smallest cities and towns, such as Jericho, Arkansas (total population 100 per 2020 Census) secure a \$100,000 Fun Park Grant to install new playground equipment and grills, to provide a safe and free family friendly space within the community. These are just a couple of the many examples that demonstrate how SSCI can help city leaders secure funding, build capacity, and leverage existing institutions, organizations and community members to build partnerships.

The SSCI Network

SSCI hosts monthly peer learning calls for communities within the state of Alabama that foster greater connections between city leaders to encourage them to share knowledge. These virtual calls are a time for collaboration, advice sharing, storytelling, lessons learned, motivation and engagement.

SSCI also hosts bi-monthly Affinity Network Calls for municipal leaders from all four states. The Affinity Network offers a learning environment for mayors, city council members, and staff to access national experts and regional partners centered on specific topics.

For more information about joining SSCI, please visit the SSCI website using the QR code or email SSCI@nlc.org to get connected to your state navigator. ■



For more information about NLC's Strong Southern Communities Initiative, scan this QR code.



Denise Belser, director of Pathways and Funding within NLC's Leadership, Education, Advancement, and Development Center, provides strategic guidance and direction for the Strong Southern Communities Initiative (SSCI). Denise has spent over a decade at NLC working directly with cities pushing for innovative policy reforms that expand economic opportunities for children and families including a multi-year initiative

assessing municipal fines, fees and other debt owed by residents to city government.



Dr. Marva Smith serves as the Alabama state consultant for the National League of Cities' Strong Southern Communities Initiative. In this role, she provides municipal leaders with analytical support, best practice guidance, partnership development and establishes positive client relationships. Through effective cross-functional communication, her collaborative efforts and relationship-building have proven effective

in getting municipalities across the grant submission finish line.



Local Government Health Insurance Board

The Local Government Health Insurance Plan (Plan) was created in 1993 by the Alabama Legislature to provide health insurance benefits for local government employees. The Plan is managed by the Local Government Health Insurance Board (LGHIB) and includes over 60,000 active and retired local government employees and their dependents.



Health and Dental

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama



Pharmacy

OptumRx



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Who is eligible to use the MIS system?

Only municipal entities within Alabama are eligible to use the MIS system. This includes cities, towns, certain utility boards, housing authorities and hospitals. For more information, visit: www.alintercept.org.

Alabama's Literary Capital Continues to Write Its Story Through Economic Development Academy



Lori Jhons • Communications Director • ALM

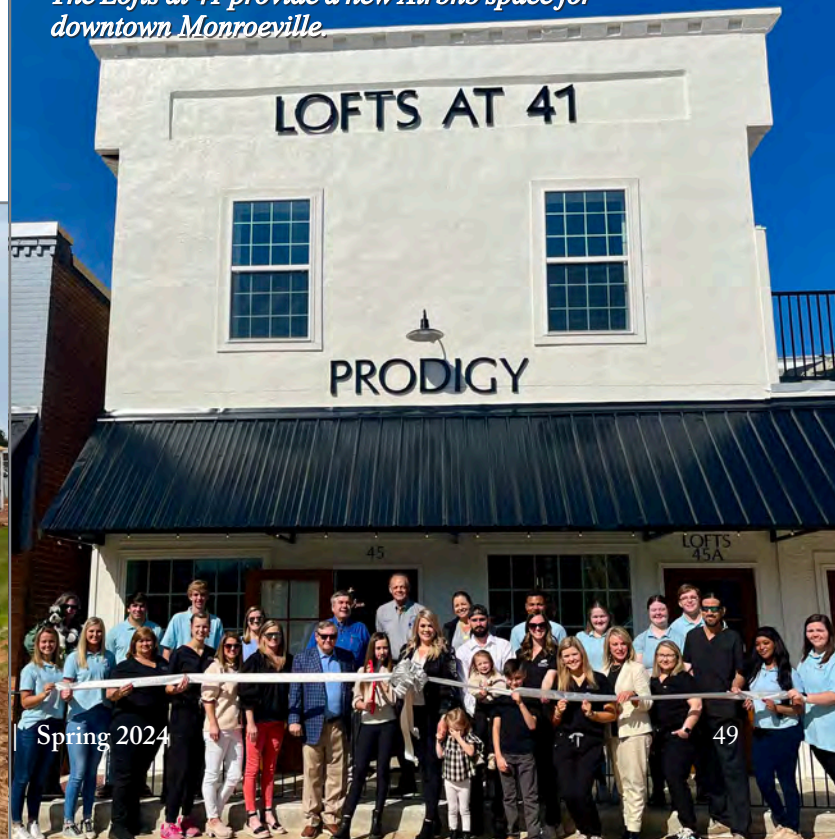
Do the titles “To Kill a Mockingbird,” “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” and “Crazy in Alabama” ring any bells? One can look far and wide and would have a difficult time finding a city that has had a greater impact on American literature than the city of Monroeville. Founded in 1899, the county seat for Monroe County (a county older than the state) has a unique place in American history. In 1997, the Alabama Legislature designated Monroeville as the Literary Capital of Alabama because of the many famous writers it has produced such as, Nelle Harper Lee, Truman Capote, Mike Stewart, Cynthia Tucker and Mark Childress. The city, which is located in between Montgomery and Mobile, is made up of about 6,000 residents.

In 2022, city leadership participated in the first class of the Alabama League of Municipalities’ Economic Development Academy (EDA) program to assess where Monroeville could grow and to learn how to attract industry, retail and residential development. EDA was developed in conjunction with the Alabama Community College System with the goal to educate and engage municipal officials on the essential elements and phases of economic development while highlighting their vital role in economic initiatives and projects within their communities. The Monroeville EDA team consisted of Mayor Charles Andrews, Councilman Al Brewton, Councilman Kenneth Ruffin, City Clerk Tamekia Hunt and Monroeville/Monroe County Economic Development Authority Director Darlene Thompson.

Mayor Andrews, a native of Monroe County, took office in November 2020. He said, “The Economic Development Academy provided resources, contacts,



The Lofts at 41 provide a new Airbnb space for downtown Monroeville.



Monroeville is constructing a new 48-unit apartment complex.



programs and data to enable the team to guide the city. The experience was joyful and informative.”

As part of the EDA, participating communities complete a community vitality index to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, like many rural Alabama cities and towns, the community vitality index revealed that Monroeville’s population has decreased, and it needs help with increasing access to it. The nearest interstate highway is approximately 20 miles away, and it does not have a four-lane highway leading to it.

Nonetheless, Monroeville prides itself on its charming, family-oriented atmosphere. The city square is at the heart of Monroeville and features the Old Monroe County Courthouse, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. Also, in 2021, the historic courthouse became a National Historic Landmark, making it one of 39 in the state for its historical impact and significance to our country. Each spring, local actors come together to perform a production of the play “To Kill a Mockingbird” in the world-famous courthouse in front of their loved ones and literary enthusiasts from near and far.

More of Monroeville’s assets and traditions include an amphitheater, baseball fields, car shows, concerts, parades and Mardi Gras celebrations. The city also boasts multiple gathering places and event venues, such as The Community House (located in the former Vanity Fair Community Center), The Water Works Conference Center (located in the base of a 2-million-gallon water tower), The Shoppe (a renovated 1940s county road department shop) and a new 4,000 square-foot pavilion in Veteran’s Park. Additionally, Monroeville is quite a safe city with a solid public safety plan, which should come as no surprise considering Mayor Andrews’ 40-year career in law enforcement. He served as the director of Alabama’s Department of Public Safety (now a division of the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency) and as a United States marshal.

In 2005, Monroeville earned the designation as an Alabama Community of Excellence. In order to be deemed one of the top places to live in Alabama, the city was required to meet detailed criteria in leadership, planning, economic development and quality of life. Nearly two decades later, city officials remain committed to their goals and still provide biannual reports to the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program, a program now under the purview of the League. City officials credit both ACE and EDA with helping them to make informed decisions and establish relationships to shape Monroeville’s future. In fact, the downtown has benefitted from several entities taking a united approach to revive it including the Monroeville/Monroe County Chamber of Commerce, Monroeville Main Street, the Monroeville/Monroe County Economic Development Authority and the Monroeville Downtown Redevelopment Authority.

Based off feasibility studies, Monroeville’s EDA approved project focused on recruiting a hotel, such as



Mayor Charles Andrews was elected in 2020.



City officials and community members celebrate a recently renovated apartment complex near downtown Monroeville.

a Holiday Inn Express or Hampton Inn. This remains a work in progress, but city officials feel better equipped to hold negotiation discussions following their EDA training. Meanwhile, short-term rental options, like Airbnb, have expanded greatly, especially in the downtown area. The city has experienced growth in housing options as well with the construction of a new 48-unit apartment complex and the renovation of an existing 20-unit apartment complex.

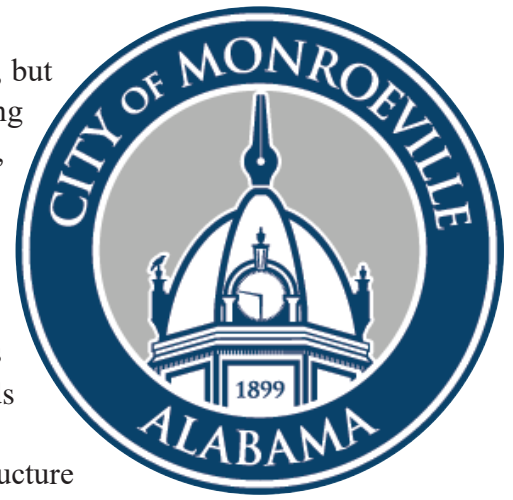
Mayor Andrews shared, “EDA impacted the decision-making process on recruiting by identifying what industries and businesses meet the needs of the city and if the city has the resources to attract them.”

Since participating in EDA, the city has pursued grants and other infrastructure resources to attract potential prospects. In an effort to retain existing businesses, the city gives tax breaks and incentives to those looking to expand or upgrade their facilities. These efforts are panning out in a major way. Just this year, Monroeville has secured two major announcements. Sterling Packaging Co., a second-generation manufacturing company, invested in a \$3.1 million project to add a Landa S10 Printing Press to their facility, which will boost production of its food and beverage containers by 25%. With the potential for growth, the company could increase its workforce to approximately 60 employees. Second, the city has a new cattle processing facility, Farm Fresh Cattle. This project is over a \$1.5 million investment and will employ between 10 and 15 employees.

Furthermore, Harrigan Lumber Company, which began operations in 1974, recently launched a multi-million-dollar expansion. The city has also opened a new RV park; constructed a new welding training facility at Coastal Alabama Community College; and has secured a location for a new restaurant, Popeye’s Chicken.

“The EDA exceeded our expectations by presentations from subject matter experts,” Mayor Andrews said. “The opportunity to be exposed to the wealth of knowledge available from peers that were willing to share their experiences was very valuable.”

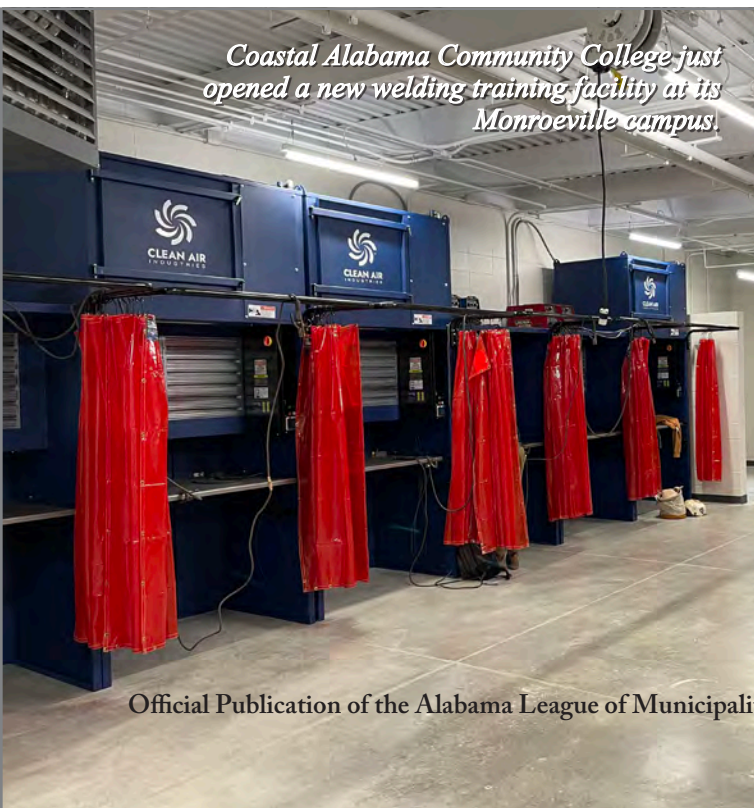
As Monroeville writes its next chapter, the mayor said they have plans to expand its industrial park, recruit retail businesses, invest in work force development and expand tourism and events to promote the city. ■



For more information
about the EDA program,
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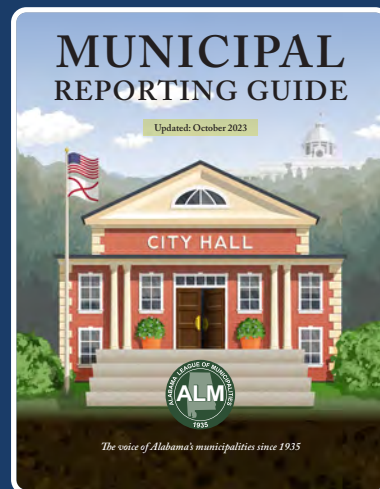
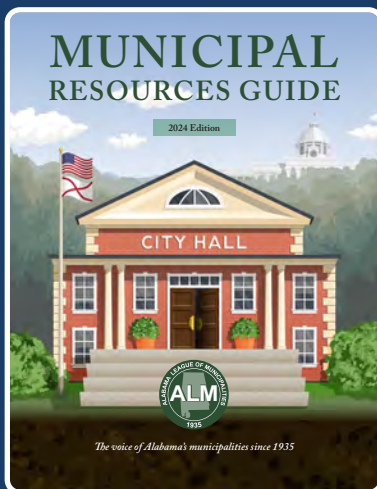
Coastal Alabama Community College just opened a new welding training facility at its Monroeville campus.



The Alabama League of Municipalities has recently updated our **Municipal Resources Guide** and **Municipal Reporting Guide**!

As part of our mission to support our members, the League created these one-stop guides to ensure our municipalities are aware of various state resources they can apply for and laws that require local governments to provide annual reports on specific municipal operations. While these guides do not include all the information about each grant program and law, they do provide an overview of the requirements, contact information and deadlines. Please reach out to any member of our team at (334) 262-2566, if you need any assistance.

Both guides are living documents that will be updated each year. Members, legislators and other elected officials are encouraged to share these great resources. They can be accessed online at almonline.org.



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ACE Spotlight: Demopolis Experiences Impressive Growth and Attracts New Industries



By Ella Painter • Communications Intern • ALM

Founded in 1817, the charming city of Demopolis was established by French settlers hoping to harvest grapes and olives. Although their efforts were unsuccessful, the “River City” has grown to have a profound impact on west-central Alabama, both economically and recreationally. Today, Demopolis is home to more than 7,000 Alabamians. Beautiful historical homes, reminiscent of the antebellum era, line the city’s streets and serve as a reminder of the state’s complex history to visitors and citizens alike.

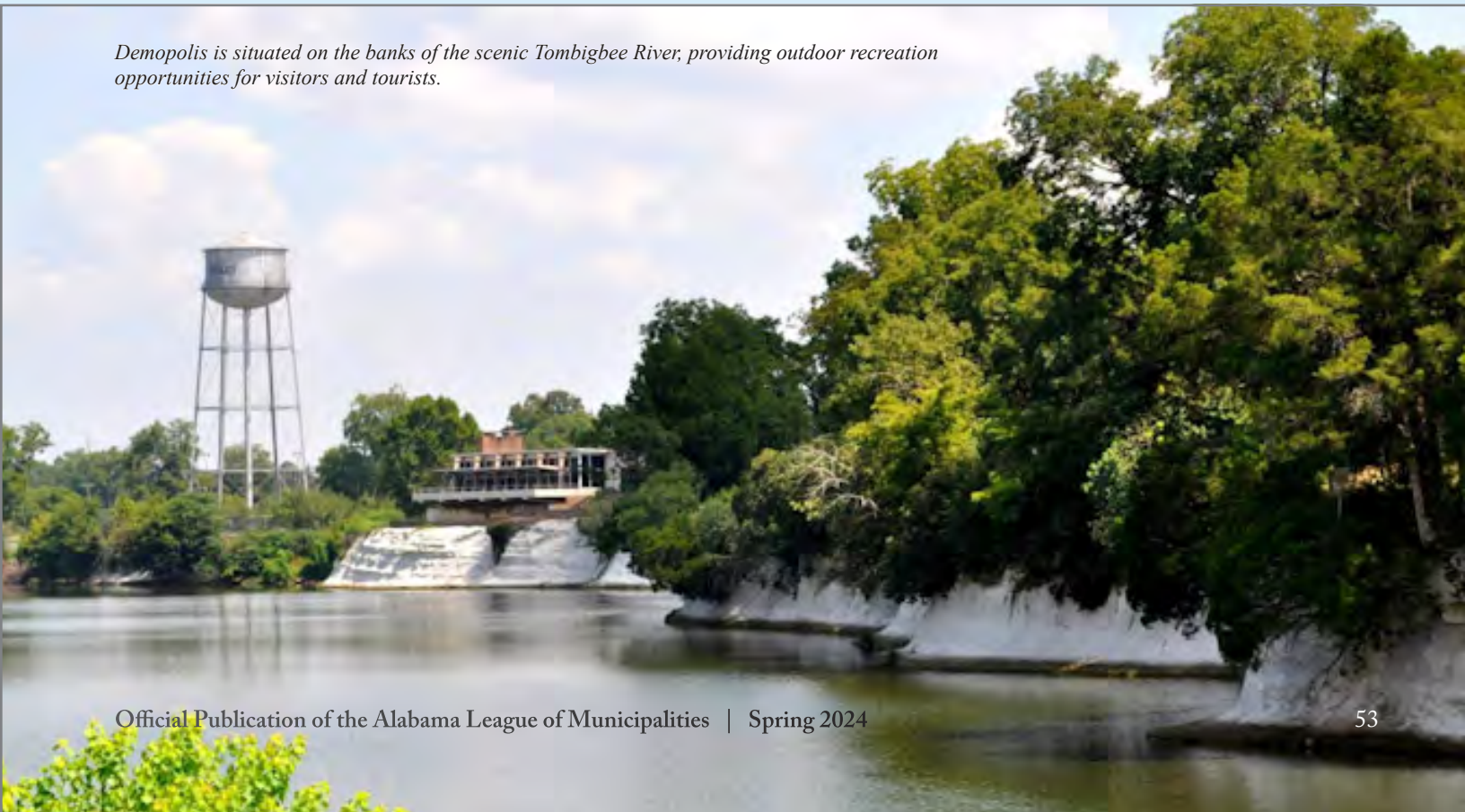
In 2003, city officials looking to grow Demopolis’ population and improve its infrastructure applied to the Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE) program. ACE was established in 2002 with the mission to provide technical assistance to select communities with populations of 2,000 to 18,000. ACE has grown to support more than 40 communities statewide. Through program participation, communities establish various long-term goals to grow and thrive, focusing on economic improvement. Since being designated an ACE community in 2005, this gem on the river has experienced various economic, educational and health care improvements.

As a Demopolis city councilman in the early 2000s, Mayor Woody Collins’ involvement with the ACE program began when municipal leaders became aware of the community’s deficiencies. Realizing the unfulfilled potential of the biggest city in Marengo County, city officials eagerly partnered with ACE to create a strategic plan to ensure its prosperity. ACE participants take a comprehensive, three-phase approach to reach each goal. The three phases are: Assessment; Leadership Development and Strategic Planning; and Implementation and Comprehensive Planning. Once a municipality has successfully completed all three phases, it is designated an “Alabama Community of Excellence,” illustrating its commitment to a positive, robust future.

Today, more than 20 years after the city joined the program, Mayor Collins has plenty of examples demonstrating the sweeping impact ACE has had on a Black Belt community in need of revitalization.

“ACE has created a spark in our community that has manifested itself as excellence in education, excellence in health

Demopolis is situated on the banks of the scenic Tombigbee River, providing outdoor recreation opportunities for visitors and tourists.



care and a now vibrant downtown area through our newly established Main Street Alabama Community designation,” Collins said.

On June 1, 2022, the city’s downtown joined the Main Street Alabama program, a partner of the League. This prestigious designation came to fruition as the result of the hard work of municipal officials and several community leaders looking to preserve the city’s historical downtown and reinvigorate its once lively business district. Through this project, Demopolis receives assistance with building restoration and attracting local businesses to downtown storefronts.



The city has also seen vast educational improvements. Wallace State Community College opened in Demopolis in 2019 and recently received recognition as an accredited two-year college. Offering economic incentives to local students interested in attending the institution, Demopolis effectively promotes higher education opportunities in the Black Belt. In August 2023, the college opened another location after receiving \$3.9 million to repurpose the city’s former National Guard Army.

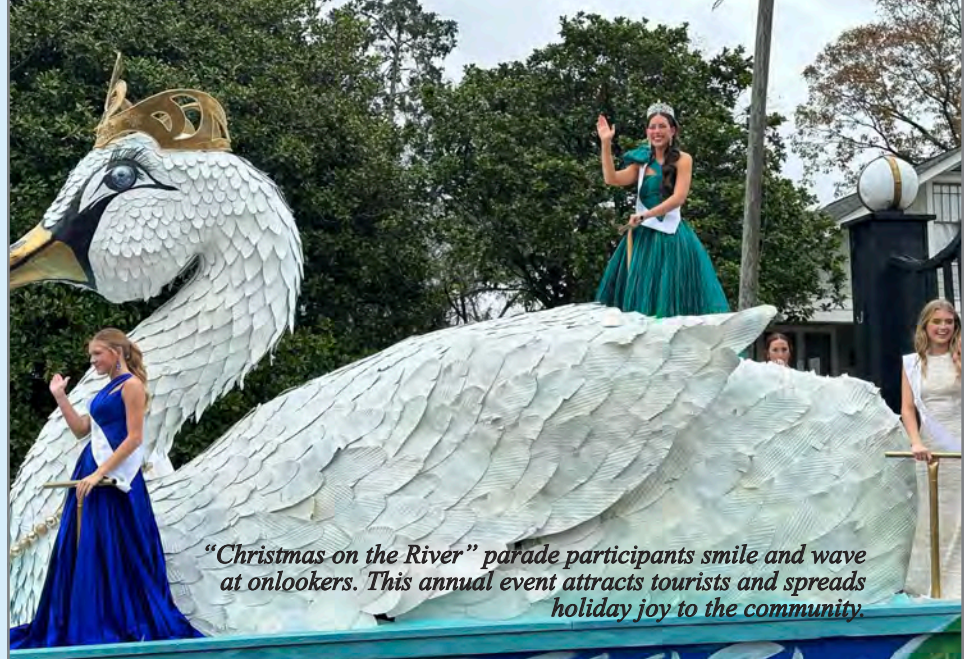
Additionally, Demopolis has the potential to host the innovative Alabama School of Healthcare Sciences (ASHS). If funding is approved by the Alabama Legislature this spring, the residential high school will attract students from across the state interested in pursuing careers in health care.

Mayor Collins said, “The ASHS is a tremendous honor for our community, as the governor has reached out to our community and shown her faith in us.” He believes the school has potential to become a nationwide model for future health care needs.

Ivey and several state leaders have concluded that Demopolis is the ideal location for ASHS based on the results of an extensive feasibility study and the city’s “gold standard” rural hospital, Whitfield Regional Hospital. The hospital recently underwent a \$25 million renovation and is a member of the prestigious University of Alabama at Birmingham Health System.

The city has also attracted new industries and major employers to the area since joining the ACE program. In January 2017, Two Rivers Lumber opened for business, investing \$65 million and creating 95 jobs in the area.

Mayor Collins views the city’s ACE distinction as a major selling point in convincing



“Christmas on the River” parade participants smile and wave at onlookers. This annual event attracts tourists and spreads holiday joy to the community.



Lane's Tire Pros' Christmas tree display won second place during a “Christmas on the River” event.



Demopolis hosts a variety of fishing events on the banks of the Tombigbee River, including Alabama High School Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS) Nation competitions.

businesses to join the community, stating, “It was an accomplishment to have the designation for our historic community, and it is very important to be able to display this designation to prospective businesses.”

An industrial-grade pellet manufacturer, Drax, also joined the community as a new business in 2019 and has had a massive economic impact. With an investment of \$100 million, the manufacturer employs 350 workers.

Leaning on its natural resources, the city continues to provide its citizens with various opportunities to experience the outdoors. For example, a newly renovated landing on the banks of the Tombigbee River can host more than 150 boaters for fishing tournaments, attracting outdoorsmen from across

the state in search of healthy competition. The Demopolis River Walk also allows

nature lovers in search of a peaceful stroll the opportunity to enjoy scenic views and birding sites.

Furthermore, the river creates unique experiences for visitors and community members and furthers economic development during holiday seasons. Demopolis’ annual “Christmas on the River” and “Freedom on the River” events attract tourists from around the state and spread seasonal cheer to all who attend. “Christmas on the River” has become a timeless tradition in the city and is a week-long celebration consisting of more than a dozen events, including two parades and a tree lighting ceremony. Similarly, “Freedom on the River” is held on the Fourth of July and features a children’s parade, fireworks and festive music. Thousands come out to enjoy these festivities each year, without fail, significantly boosting the local economy.

Despite experiencing major progress in the last 20 years, Demopolis is not yet done. The city is determined to continue to improve and pursue its ACE program goals through a steering committee, which consists of various community members passionate about Demopolis’ continued advancement.

When asked what advice he has for cities interested in participating in the program, Mayor Collins said, “Take the time and sign up. You’ll discover issues you’ve been overlooking for years.”

If your municipality needs assistance with updating your strategic plan or is interested in becoming an ACE community, contact Mary Jackson at mjackson@almonline.org. Learn more about the ACE program at www.alabamacommunitiesofexcellence.org. ■

Top: Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce members and business owners celebrate the ribbon-cutting of Nancy and Co. Fine Jewelers.

Bottom: Two Rivers Lumber was named “Business of the Year” by the Demopolis Chamber of Commerce in June 2020.



For more information about the ACE program and its impact on smaller communities, scan this QR code.

Cybersecurity, Risk-Based Budgeting and AI:

New Approaches to Municipal IT Budgeting

Kevin Howarth * Marketing Content Manager * UC3



Information technology and cybersecurity are a critical part of a municipality's annual spending. It is important for towns and cities to flesh out a fairly detailed IT budget to help uncover inefficiencies, save money, stay secure and compliant and better execute operational goals. In just a few years, much has changed about IT budgeting in areas ranging from cybersecurity to artificial intelligence (AI). This article discusses three areas that have become critically important to towns and cities.

Cybersecurity

Budgeting for cybersecurity is absolutely crucial to ensure that municipalities have the necessary resources to protect sensitive information and IT assets from cyber threats.

Some essential IT budgeting line items for cybersecurity include:

- **Endpoint Security:** It is important to secure endpoints (such as servers, desktop computers and laptops) with software such as endpoint detection and response (EDR).
- **Firewalls:** A good firewall is a barrier between your internal network and untrusted external networks, such as the internet, that helps prevent unauthorized access to your network. Your firewall might be onsite hardware or cloud-based.
- **Security Awareness Training:** Training programs educate employees about cybersecurity best practices, phishing awareness and social engineering risks.
- **Security Monitoring and Alerting:** Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) solutions provide real-time analysis of security alerts generated by applications and network hardware.

- **Third-Party Vulnerability Assessment and Penetration Testing:** Regular vulnerability assessments and penetration tests identify and address potential weaknesses in your systems.
 - **Data Loss Prevention (DLP):** DLP tools (such as cloud application monitoring and alerting) monitor, detect and prevent the unauthorized access or transmission of sensitive data.
- **Cloud Security:** This includes identity and access management (IAM), encryption, threat detection and security monitoring services to protect your cloud hardware and applications.
- **Cyber Insurance:** Cyber insurance provides financial protection in the event of a security breach or data loss.

Risk-based Budgeting

Instead of viewing your IT budget as a list of random components, it is helpful to look at it through a risk-based lens. Risk-based budgeting prioritizes and allocates resources based on an assessment of potential risks and the strategies needed to mitigate them.

With a risk-based approach, you examine your current IT budget to see if you are:

- Underinvesting in important cybersecurity measures that help you protect sensitive information and assets, potentially leaving you wide open to a devastating cyberattack.
- Increasing the probability of downtime, permanent data loss and operational system failures that negatively impact resident services and employee productivity.
- Threatening the success of important projects and initiatives because you do not have basic foundational technology capabilities in place.

To approach IT budgeting from a risk-based perspective, it is important to take a few steps to make sure your dollars are prioritized for maximum impact.
- **Assess your environment and infrastructure:** A thorough assessment identifies potential risks such as your ability to fend off cybersecurity threats, the impact of technology

obsolescence, regulatory compliance challenges, IT-related project delays and other uncertainties.

- **Prioritize next steps:** Once risks are identified, assess and prioritize based on their potential impact. Risks that pose a higher impact and likelihood should receive greater attention.
- **Allocate budget for risks and contingencies:** Resources are allocated in your budget based on the prioritized risks. Areas with higher risks may receive increased budget allocations to implement preventive measures, mitigation strategies, and contingency plans. This ensures that critical areas are adequately funded to address potential challenges.

Roadmapping is also part of the goal here. An IT budget is ideally used to create a long-term plan where gaps are identified, investments are prioritized for the highest-risk areas and items are checked off starting with the most critical.

Risk-based budgeting is an iterative process that involves continuous monitoring of risk factors and reassessment of your budget throughout the fiscal year. This enables municipalities to adapt their budgetary allocations in response to emerging risks or changing priorities. By integrating risk considerations into the budgeting process, municipalities can enhance their ability to anticipate, respond to and mitigate potential challenges. This approach promotes a more resilient and adaptive IT environment aligned with your risk tolerance and strategic goals.

To get started with a risk-based mindset, we have identified five questions municipalities should consider.

1. When was the last time I conducted an IT assessment or audit?
2. Is my data backup tested and operational?
3. Is my hardware at its end of life?
4. Have I recently evaluated our Internet Service Provider (ISP) or telecom provider?
5. Are my IT support costs unpredictable?

How Municipalities Are Adding AI to Budgets

Municipalities are increasingly leveraging artificial intelligence to enhance efficiency, improve services and address various challenges. It's a fascinating topic, but sometimes AI can seem impractical and visionary when you hear real world examples discussed in presentations or in the media.

To bring the discussion down to earth, let us look at some practical ways that municipalities can use AI:

- **Public Safety and Emergency Response:** AI can be employed in public safety applications, including predictive policing for crime prevention, emergency response optimization and analysis of social media

and other data sources to identify potential threats or incidents.

- **Water Management:** AI can be applied to monitor and manage water distribution systems, detect leaks and predict equipment failures. This improves water conservation, quality, and overall utility efficiency.
- **Waste Management:** AI can be used to optimize waste collection routes based on factors like historical data, real-time usage patterns and environmental conditions. This helps reduce costs and minimize environmental impact.
- **Urban Planning and Development:** AI can be utilized in urban planning to analyze demographic data, traffic patterns, and environmental factors. This assists in making informed decisions about zoning, infrastructure development and land use.
- **Resident Services:** AI-powered website chatbots and virtual assistants can be employed to handle citizen inquiries, provide information and streamline interactions with municipal services. This enhances customer service and responsiveness.
- **Traffic Management and Optimization:** AI-powered traffic management systems can analyze real-time data from cameras, sensors and other sources to optimize traffic flow. This includes adaptive traffic signal control and dynamic routing to reduce congestion and improve transportation efficiency.
- **Energy Efficiency:** AI can be employed to optimize energy consumption in municipal buildings and facilities. Smart grids and AI algorithms can help manage energy distribution, reduce costs and promote sustainability.
- **Smart Infrastructure Management:** AI can be used to monitor and manage infrastructure components such as roads, bridges and utilities. Predictive analytics can help identify potential issues, allowing for proactive maintenance and minimizing downtime.

All in all, embrace IT budgeting—including these new approaches—as an opportunity to enhance your overall municipal budgeting. Once you address your technology and cybersecurity risks, your municipality will make positive leaps forward in ways that you never before imagined. ■

Kevin Howarth is the marketing content manager for VC3, the Alabama League of Municipalities' IT consulting partner and the largest managed services provider focused on local government in the United States. His background includes over 20 years of writing, publishing and content marketing experience in information technology, cybersecurity and municipal government.

Birmingham City Clerk Lee Frazier Elected to VP of International Institute of Municipal Clerks

The Alabama League of Municipalities congratulates Lee Frazier, city clerk of Birmingham, Alabama, for his election as the vice president of the International Institute of Municipal Clerks (IIMC).

IIMC is the premier organization for municipal clerks. Founded in 1947, IIMC has 75 years of experience improving the professionalism of municipal clerks. IIMC has more than 15,000 members that represent cities and towns of various sizes. IIMC is affiliated with 49 U.S. and nine Canadian municipal associations.

An Enterprise native, Frazier has more than three decades of experience in municipal government, preparing him to represent Alabama well. He has previously served as the city clerk of Brighton and as the deputy city clerk of Birmingham.

Frazier currently serves as the region III director of IIMC, providing service and support to clerks in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. In 2019, he served as the host clerk for the IIMC conference in Birmingham and has played an integral role in organizing several past region III conferences in Alabama.

Additionally, Frazier also holds leadership positions in his community. Notably, he is president of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and the Alabama Association of Municipal Clerks and Administrators. He also serves as a board member of the Samford University Black Alumni Association and the Neighborhood Housing Services of Birmingham.

Frazier graduated from Samford University with a Bachelor of Science in public administration and holds a Juris Doctorate from Miles Law School. Frazier is the recipient of the distinguished 2016 Alabama Municipal Clerk of the Year Award and the 2012 NAACP Outstanding African American Award.

He will be sworn in as the association's first ever male African American vice president in late May at IIMC's 78th Annual Conference in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Congratulations, Lee! There is no better person for the job. ■



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ALM Wishes Chuck Burns a Happy Retirement!

Upon his retirement on March 1, 2024, the League extends its heartfelt gratitude to Chuck Burns for his tireless devotion to its organization and the improvement of Alabama's municipalities. Chuck has touched the lives of many Alabamians across the state through his leadership and devotion to keeping citizens and law enforcement officials safe.

During his tenure as FATS coordinator for the Loss Control Department, Chuck led gun safety courses for municipal law enforcement departments seeking to further train their employees and improve their confidence and decision-making skills in time sensitive situations. By leading the program's courses and taking charge of advocating for the increased training of law enforcement officials, Chuck played an influential role in the improvement of countless police programs across Alabama.

Furthermore, before joining the League, Chuck devoted 28 years of his career to the Alabama Department of Public Safety. Upon leaving the organization in 2004, he held the rank of trooper captain while he served as chief examiner for the driver license division. Chuck also spent several years working with the highway patrol division and in commercial vehicle enforcement with the motor carrier safety unit.

The League thanks Chuck for his service to its organization and wishes him the best in his retirement. Cheers to you, Chuck! ■





Two New Staff Members Join ALM



Deena Pregno, Loss Control FATS Coordinator

Deena Pregno joined the Loss Control Department as FATS coordinator in February. She retired from the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency in 2019 with 23 years of service. Upon retirement, she held the rank of ALEA chief over the driver license division. She served several years in the highway patrol, executive security and service divisions. Prior to working with ALEA, she was employed with the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences for 10 years. Deena graduated from the Alabama State Trooper Academy and received a bachelor's degree in business administration from Troy University. Deena is a member of Frazer Methodist Church. ■



Joseph Holley, ALM Associate Counsel

Joseph Holley joined the League's legal department as associate counsel in March of 2024 and is responsible for advising municipal officials and employees spanning more than 450 member cities and towns, drafting legal articles and advising municipal officials, employees and attorneys on municipal matters. Prior to joining the League, Joseph worked as a trial attorney with the Montgomery County Public Defender's Office representing indigent clients who could not afford legal representation in the criminal justice system. During his tenure with the Public Defender's Office, Joseph advocated for low-income clients within the 15th Judicial Circuit and cultivated relationships with city, county and state prosecutors, as well as district and circuit court judges along with their staffs.

During his final year of law school, Joseph clerked for the Hill, Hill, Carter, Franco, Cole & Black, PC law firm, the Honorable Judge Monet Gaines, and the Jones School of Law Elder Law and Family Violence Clinics. Joseph's passion and zeal for community involvement and public service led to him to being awarded the distinguished Alabama State Bar Law Student Pro Bono Service Award in 2021.

Joseph is a Montgomery, AL native but graduated from Mount Diablo High School in Concord, CA. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in business administration from Auburn University of Montgomery in 2003 and followed it up with a master's degree in business administration from the same university in 2008. He then navigated a successful career in hospitality management spanning almost two decades managing Hilton and Marriott hotel brands. Joseph then pursued a law degree and graduated from Thomas Goode Jones School of Law in the Spring of 2021.

Joseph is a member of the Montgomery County Bar Association, the Alabama Lawyers Association and the Alabama State Bar. When away from the office, Joseph enjoys spending time with his nieces and nephews, family and friends, playing chess, traveling, listening to jazz music and watching movies. ■

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