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

Meeting the ever-growing need for mental health and substance abuse services in Collier County has been a top priority for local leaders, nonprofits, advocates, and the Community Foundation of Collier County for the past several years. Just in the past two years, the Community Foundation has already distributed $445,000 in competitive community program grants to 15 local organizations on these issues’ frontlines. An additional $10,000 was granted to fund Collier County’s Mental Health and Addiction Services Strategic Plan Committee, which developed a five-year plan approved by the commissioners in December 2019. The expanded coalition continues to meet as the Collier Coalition for Healthy Minds in coordination with the Community Foundation of Collier County.

Among other daunting statistics, his updated presentation noted:

• DLC has 30 crisis treatment beds, and the facility is consistently at peak capacity. The Florida Department of Children and Family’s suggested ratio is 30 adult Baker Act beds for every 100,000 population, which means more than 100 Baker Act beds are needed in Collier County.

• Baker Acts made through the Collier County Sheriff’s Office rose from 1,303 in 2015 to 1,638 in 2019—a 20.45 percent increase in four years.

• The center’s Crisis Stabilization Units for adults and children were averaging ten more clients each day in September 2020 compared to September 2019, and even higher on peak days.

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

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

Both Burgess and Collier County Sheriff Kevin Rambosk expect needs to rise dramatically when society returns to some sense of post-pandemic normalcy as vaccinations become widespread.
had been pledged toward mental health and major donors. As of October, $402,500 in funds for six targeted areas in Collier County in the fall and designed to raise dedicated staffing, counseling services, and a helpline.

The Community Foundation of Collier County hopes the facility will be complete in 2022.

Baker and Marchman Acts, whether voluntary treatment of a person abusing alcohol or drugs that need urgent attention, identified in the CCSO Five-Year Strategic Plan (2020-2024), adopted by the board of commissioners in 2020.

The Community Foundation of Collier County was launched, for persons experiencing serious mental illness and/or substance use disorders experiencing an acute mental health or substance use crisis.

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

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

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

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

NAMI Collier also operates a state-funded mental health hotline (the WarmLine at 800-945-1335) that provides peer counseling for individuals with a mental illness seven days a week for the Southwest Florida region. It also continues to provide over $30,000 in financial assistance for psychiatric evaluations and social service needs. One daily visitor told its clients: While Baker worked on the county’s strategic plan and whole-hearted praises plans for the new central receiving facility, she is a big proponent of the committee’s second priority: affordable, supportive housing for people with serious mental illness so they can receive the wrap-around services they need to gradually get well and find employment.

“Housing is healthcare. Without good supportive housing, people will cycles in and out of the criminal justice system,” she said.

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

In communities across the nation, local jails have become the de facto landing pad for many residents struggling with mental health and substance use issues. “We don’t want that to be the case in our community,” said Rambosk. “That’s why we’re looking at a centralized receiving facility for intake for persons in need. So, they do not have to be transported and housed in a jail facility.”

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

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

Rambosk has enacted changes in how requests are handled, implemented training programs for identifying and de-escalating mental illness crises for law enforcement officers, and partnered with DLC to establish a mental health unit in the jail staffed with trained personnel. This program was implemented a year ago with one clinician and already expanded to two clinicians late last year.

Mental health training has also been extended to fire-rescue and emergency medical services frontline personnel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Call us at 239.649.5000 or visit YourPassionYourCollier.org to learn more.

The Community Foundation: 35 Years of Connecting Passion With Purpose

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

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