

# May is 'Mental Health Awareness Month'

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## *East Alabama Mental Health Center*

**By Shawn Kirkpatrick**

*Opelika Observer*

One-in-five adults in the United States have a mental health condition. That's more than 40 million Americans, and more than the populations of New York and Florida combined. Among children and teens, mental health issues are increasing every year with severe depression being a major contributor, according to the website Mental Health America ([mentalhealthamerica.net/issues/state-mental-health-america](http://mentalhealthamerica.net/issues/state-mental-health-america)).

May is Mental Health Awareness Month and here at home, East Alabama Mental Health Center (EAMHC) offers help and support for children, teens, adults, families and seniors. "EAMHC is a 'community' mental health center. We serve Lee, Russell, Chambers and Tallapoosa counties," said Jean Spicer, director of Family and Children's Services for East Alabama Mental Health Center. "We are also a comprehensive mental health center, which means we provide services for individuals with mental illness and children with serious emotional disturbance, also individuals with intellectual disabilities and substance abuse issues."

Established in 1967 as a public nonprofit, EAMHC offers a broad range of programs for close to 8,000 people a year, in mental duress.

"We provide individual, family and group counseling. We have therapists in around 40 schools in all four counties," Spicer said. "In Opelika we have an after-school day treatment program, which provides more intensive services after school is out. This is for children that are struggling and have a lot of behavioral challenges, at home and at school."

EAMHC even has a program for the very young with mental health issues.

"There is also our preschool intervention program for those children getting kicked out of the daycares," said Prevention Services Coordinator for East Alabama Mental Health Center Chelsie Neighbors. "Sometimes children need more individualized help, so they come here several days a week and get direct, hands-on help. We see amazing benefits from that."

For adults there are several options in all four counties. "Adults are set up with an intake interview and assigned a therapist who will work with them to set up a treatment plan," Spicer said. "We have outpatient services and counseling, psychiatrists and nurse practitioners. For folks that need lots of support to navigate life, we have a day program that teaches life skills. There is also a crisis intervention unit for adults called Brief Intensive Treatment or BIT.

"It's designed to be a short-term crisis stabilization," Spicer said. "It is residential. The average

stay is anywhere from seven days to six weeks. It's acute care."

Both Spicer and Neighbors said the stigma that comes with mental illness does keep some people from reaching out for help.

"It's a combination of the fear of shame, or being labeled, or the way Hollywood presents mental illness and what that may look like, but that is not the face of someone living with mental illness," Neighbors adds. "Also, I think people don't know if what they are experiencing is normal but what is normal? My normal is not your normal. People may not know it (a mental issue) is causing difficulty in an area of their life until they have a conversation with someone and realize they don't have to live with fear or overwhelming sadness."

Neighbors said they want to bring more awareness to mental illness. "Our big connection to the community is we offer mental health first aid training. We talk about what you can do if somebody is in a mental health crisis. We teach to destigmatize language that is centered around mental health care.

Knowledge and early intervention is a huge way to get the community involved."

Both Spicer and Neighbors want people with mental health issues to know they are not alone

"There is a lot of relief when you sit down with someone and they validate you," Neighbors says

"They say, 'I hear you, and I see you, and I can empathize with you.' It's a great release to know someone understands." Spicer adds, "There is hope. It is not hopeless. It won't always be this way."

For help with any mental health condition, call 334-742- 2877, 1-800- 815-0630 or visit [prevention@eamhc.org](mailto:prevention@eamhc.org). EAMHC does not deny services to anyone who can't pay.

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