

# The Interview: AltaPointe CEO Tuerk Schlesinger

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MOBILE, Ala. (WALA) - Fifteen years ago changes in the mental health care system led to the downsizing and eventual closing of Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon last October. AltaPointe Health Care Systems is one organization that serves that former client base and others in need of behavioral health treatment. Tuerk Schlesinger is AltaPointe's CEO. In his 23-years in the industry, Schlesinger has seen some major improvements. He recently shared about the successes and what Searcy's closing has meant to his clients.

"I lived on a dirt road out in the Eight Mile area of Prichard, Alabama, and there were so many people that were just great people that just needed some help. And a little bit of help went a long way with the people that we were surrounded by," Schlesinger said.

Schlesinger said he was just a teenager when he made those observations of the effects of social problems on folks in his neighborhood.

As Chief Executive Officer of AltaPointe Health Systems, he leads a thousand person organization that helps a lot of folk here on the Gulf Coast in Florida, Mississippi and Alabama.

After finishing Auburn University, Schlesinger worked in health care at East Alabama Medical Center, a hospital in Auburn. He learned a lot and really enjoyed what he was doing but wanted to return to the Mobile area. Schlesinger applied for an assistant director position and returned to what he thought would be just a temporary stop at Baldwin County Mental Health.

"The more I started getting involved in mental health and start realizing the differences that we were making in people's lives, I absolutely fell in love with what the mental health system is and what it does for people. I felt like we could really make a difference," Schlesinger said.

In 1998, he joined Mobile Mental Health, AltaPointe's predecessor.

"Health care changes were starting to come down the pike to create a better quality of life for all of those individuals. I started seeing mental health become more important to the nation and to the state and then to the local area. In the late 90s where medications changed dramatically, fantastic new medicines for individuals with mental health problems, to help them be able to 'come out,' to function as normal of a life as they can," Schlesinger said.

"To come out" means transitioning clients out of state hospitals like Searcy in Mount Vernon, into community based facilities. Like others in the behavioral health care industry, Schlesinger saw this coming and the successful benefits. Unfortunately, he said the public was not as informed.

"Some individuals who don't understand how the mental health system works, and it's probably because of the stigma that we don't really communicate with the public what really goes on is, is that when Searcy shut down I know that people throughout our region say, 'What did they do just open the doors and let patients go out?' That is so much, so far from the truth. What really happened was, we went in and really gave clinical evaluations to

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every patient that was in there. Some of the individuals really didn't need to be there. They really could live in the community comfortably without providing any risk to anyone," shared Schlesinger.

Schlesinger believes a large number of Searcy's patients were there only to help keep the doors open.

AltaPointe's two hospitals and 41 facilities serve 15,000 people on the Gulf Coast. Programs are designed to help clients live a normal life.

"We have physicians that round on our patients one or two times every day, and at Searcy Hospital, those physicians were so understaffed. They had physicians that were rounding on patients maybe once every two to three weeks. Our treatment has been so much more targeted, treatment team involvement from social workers, pharmacy systems that were far advanced with the most advanced formulary pharmaceuticals to treat these individuals. And, then to try to get them to be released into the type of environment that would be most appropriate for them," said Schlesinger.

AltaPointe's treatment has developed some incredible client successes, but Schlesinger says there are still challenges.

"Our biggest challenge is how can we keep them compliant. The medicines work, but, how do we make them be compliant with those medicines as to where they can live in the community and not create any risk to themselves or any kind of risk to anyone else," Schlesinger said.

"I've got people that I'm seeing that have been in the state institutions for 30 years, applying for jobs and getting jobs and doing things that are really, really pro active for our economy, and for their mental health. One patient who was non-verbal for years is now speaking, using the bathroom on his own, for him life has improved 100-percent," Schlesinger reflected.

"You're just really, really encouraged to continue doing what we do it's very exciting, and I think we're doing exactly the right thing. We feel like that has been really a home run. I love

this job, it's a job you get to come in and look at the glass as half full, and observe how much we're able to do for everybody every day. What we really like doing is, assessing whether or not we're really making a difference in every area that mental health is lacking," says Schlesinger.

Tuerk Schlesinger says using business practices similar to the acute care hospital industry is another reason for AltaPointe's success. He believes a community based program is the best treatment option for those in need of behavioral health care. Now that mental health has become a part of the national discussion, Schlesinger is optimistic and encouraged that it will help in the areas of funding.