

# The Outlook

Alabama Department of Mental Health Newsletter



## ADMH Historian Looks back on a Half-Century

**Historian Steve Davis' career with ADMH began in 1974 with what he thought would be a temporary job at Bryce Hospital.**

"It was one of those years where there was a recession, and you couldn't get a job," he said. "They hired me as a laborer, and my job was to guard the front gate. .... I was planning to work for two weeks."

From there, Davis began a two-year stint as a security officer and investigator. Those early years with the department roused the Tuscaloosa native's curiosity about the background of Bryce and mental health services in Alabama. As a history buff, he already had a preoccupation with the past, and his time with the Bryce Police Department only intensified that interest.

"On weekends, I would take people to the graveyard," he said. "They would find the grave of their relative or ancestor, and I saw how special that was to people. So that kind of touched me early on."

By 1977, Davis had moved into a public relations position at the facility – a job that allowed him to use his journalism degree from the University of Alabama (UA). A year later, he was named Bryce's director of public relations. As part of this job, he became the voice for the hospital, speaking on radio shows, addressing civic organizations and conducting tours of the facility.

"I did a lot of public speaking," he said. "We had tours every day for middle schools and high schools ... So I created a little museum. That's how it started, and I would talk to the students about history."

Even after moving into Bryce's personnel office in 1979, Davis continued to be the go-to person for tours and information on the history of the hospital.

"The whole time I was in HR, I continued to do tours," he said. "I did the political people that were running for state office, like (former lieutenant governor) Lucy Baxley. She would come to Bryce every time she was running for office and do a tour. She'd call the newspaper, and they would interview her out in front of the hospital."

In the early 2000s, when then-Gov. Bob Riley announced that UA would purchase the Bryce campus, Davis was appointed by then-Commissioner John Houston – whom Davis had met when Houston was an advocate at Bryce – to be ADMH's main representative on the Bryce Hospital Preservation Committee.

At one point, Davis said, UA was considering razing the hospital building and its grounds.

"They just wanted to flatten it. We wanted to preserve the old campus," he said.



After years of planning and negotiation, UA agreed to restore the building and to include a space for a museum.

"Now, Bryce's main building is the most recognized building at the university. It's on every ad for the University of Alabama, and the Randall Welcome Center is there," Davis said.

All of the planning that surrounded the sale of the Bryce campus highlighted the need for a designated person to preserve its and the department's history, leading Commissioner Houston to create a new job: [historian](#).

In 2008, Davis became the department's first and – so far – only person to hold that position.

More than 50 years after he accepted what he thought was a stop-gap job, Davis has worked with 16 commissioners. "I really thought I'd work here for two weeks," he said, chuckling.

Needless to say, Davis has witnessed a great deal of change in his half-century with the department.

One of the more significant advancements, he said, has happened in the last few years as the department has worked to build the [Alabama Crisis System of Care](#).

"[Crisis Centers](#) are a game changer," he said. "Having dealt with mental illness – and I've had family members I've had to take to the emergency room and be there all night – you're talking to a nurse that's not a psych nurse. And, you know, the stigma has reduced greatly. That's one thing .... So if you can keep somebody from being committed to Bryce, that's a big deal."







He also cites the increase in the number of mental health centers around the state as a positive development.

“People can get help now who just could not get help before,” he said.

In terms of his own impressive list of accomplishments, Davis points to the [June 2024 opening of the Bryce Museum](#), which is estimated to host some 1,000 visitors a month, as “topping them all.”

“I really didn’t think it was going to be done. We had talked about it way back in the ’70s,” he said. “John (Houston, former commissioner) had talked about the little display that I had set up that we called a museum and that we needed to have a real museum because of the rich history of this. By the time we had the opening, I was pretty ecstatic and proud. I think it’s a great asset.”

Ultimately, for Davis, the work of ADMH is about helping people, though. For example, even though presiding at funerals has never been a part of his official job description, Davis has delivered the eulogy at several gravesides during his time at Bryce, including one for a Bryce patient who had died.

“That was before I was historian. ... and I had known him,” he said. “When you work right there on campus, you have friends who have been patients for years. So, I did a little service.”

Those requests happen one or two times a year, Davis said.

“They’ll (family who have loved ones buried at Bryce) ask that I say a few words. I started trying to be prepared,” he said.

And, through all of his years with ADMH, his strongest recollections and most impactful experiences involve the people he’s encountered during his time at the facility and their individual stories.

“The first people I took to the cemetery after I became historian were from Hokes Bluff. And the grandmother of the group – it was her grandmother who had been committed to Bryce, and all she could remember was a sheriff’s car taking her away. ... That family still comes,” he said.

When the family called years later, Davis answered the phone and the caller said, “Well, there was an old man who helped my grandmother years ago. I think he’s dead.”

To which Davis replied, “No, that was me.”



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[publicinformation.dmh@mh.alabama.gov](mailto:publicinformation.dmh@mh.alabama.gov)

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# A New Chapter in Provider Certification with ACAP

## Big things are happening at the Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH).

We're excited to announce the launch of a major improvement to how we handle provider certifications — it's called the **Alabama Certification Automation Program**, or **ACAP** for short. The Office of Certification, Life Safety, staff in MHSU and DD, along with the Division of Administration will all be working closely and more efficiently together through ACAP.

ACAP is all about making things easier, faster, and more connected. Instead of dealing with paper forms and physical mail, the entire certification process is moving online. This digital system will give staff and providers real-time access to applications and status updates, helping everyone stay informed and on track.

### WHY THIS MATTERS: SIMPLER, SAFER, AND MORE CONNECTED

While ACAP keeps the structure of our current process, it removes many of the hassles that come with paper processes and possible delays due to routing documents through numerous offices. Here's how it helps:

- **Digital Signatures & Tracking:** No more waiting on mail. All approvals happen securely online, with time-stamped records.
- **Technological Efficiency:** Bye, bye to paper. Allows providers to submit applications and supporting documentation via ACAP.
- **Team Collaboration:** Staff can easily share access, leave comments, and keep things moving — even if someone's out of the office.
- **Built-In Communication Tools:** Need input from someone else? ACAP makes it simple to involve others in the review process.

### SAVING TIME AND MONEY

By cutting out the paper, toner, mailing costs, and storage needs, we're saving valuable resources. Providers with large networks (some with more than 70 sites) will be able to print their own certificates and track their applications in real time — reducing the chance of delays or lost documents.



## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFF: BETTER CONNECTIONS, STRONGER TEAMS

Around 40 team members from different divisions — including MHSU, Life Safety, DD certification, and regional community services offices' directors and staff — will use ACAP. The system encourages teamwork across departments and replaces the old method of passing papers around with easy email prompts.

But the benefits go deeper than just logistics. Working together more closely helps us feel more united in our mission. When people can see how their work fits into the bigger picture, it builds a sense of purpose and pride. Clearer communication also means less frustration, quicker problem-solving, and better relationships across teams.

With ACAP, ADMH is building a workplace that's not just more efficient, but also more supportive, connected, and resilient — especially during audits, transitions, or staff absences.

## WHERE WE ARE NOW

In April, ADMH informed providers of the upcoming changes and the **July Phase 2 Provider Certification Meeting** will include a live demo of ACAP and an overview of the rollout plan. This will help new applicants understand exactly what to expect.

Additionally, User Acceptance Testing (called UAT) is well underway. So far, 10 providers from the DD and MHSU divisions have tested the system through demos and hands-on training, working alongside our vendor, SimpliGov. New features like Site Visits reporting and the Life Safety internal workflow process are currently being developed and tested.

## WHAT'S NEXT

ADMH aims to launch ACAP in the **second or third week of August**. To make the switch easier, there will be a **30-day grace period**, so providers may submit paper applications during that time, if needed. Additionally, ADMH Certification Project Team and providers will participate in a live training with the SimpliGov Project Team prior to the go-live date.

## A STEP TOWARD THE FUTURE

ACAP isn't just a new system — it's a fresh way of working together. By removing roadblocks and making processes clearer, ADMH is creating a more positive experience for staff and providers alike.

## Stigma and Suicide: Suicide Prevention Month

September marks [National Suicide Prevention Month](#), a time to break the silence, challenge the stigma, and come together to support those in need. It is not just about raising awareness. It is about taking real steps to protect, dismantle stigma and giving people voices. Because suicide does not discriminate. It can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, or background.

We often avoid talking about suicidal thoughts, but they are more common than most people realize.

This month, the focus is on changing the conversation. We want to spread hope and resources, not shame. We want families, friends, coworkers to feel like they can speak up, ask for help, and offer support without stigma standing in the way.

INTERNATIONAL  
**OVERDOSE**  
AWARENESS DAY  
— AUGUST 31 —



To shine a light on this effort, the [Alabama Department of Mental Health](#) will commemorate the month by lighting the RSA Tower in teal and purple, the official colors of suicide prevention. The department will also be sharing resources, stories, and support through social media and community events to raise awareness and offer help where it is needed most.





# A New FOCUS on Cell Phones in Schools and Youth Mental Health

**Youth mental health is increasingly impacted by digital devices, particularly smartphones.**

While technology can offer educational tools and social connections, excessive screen time has been linked to rising rates of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and social isolation among young people. Social media, in particular, can expose youth to unrealistic comparisons, cyberbullying, and constant connectivity that leaves little time for offline rest and reflection.

In response, a new state law, the [FOCUS Act](#), was enacted in the past legislative session. The FOCUS Act prohibits students from using wireless communication devices, including cell phones, in public schools starting next school year.

This law aims to reduce distractions and improve student engagement. While the law allows exceptions for emergencies, health conditions, and educational purposes, it generally mandates that devices be turned off and stored in a locker, car, or similar location. The law also requires schools to implement internet safety policies and social media training.

Cell phone bans like the FOCUS Act hope to create a more focused academic environment, improve social skills, and reduce exposure to harmful online content, increasing mental health and well-being for the youth of Alabama.

## KEY POINTS OF THE FOCUS ACT:

- Students are generally prohibited from using wireless communication devices, including cell phones, on school grounds.
- Exceptions are made for emergencies, health conditions, and educational purposes.
- Devices must be turned off and stored in a designated location, such as a locker, car, or designated storage device.
- The law mandates that school systems implement wireless communication policies, including consequences for violations.
- Schools must adopt internet safety policies and provide social media training for students.

# Bridging the Gap Between Faith & Recovery: FBSS Expands Nationwide

For many in the faith community, there is a missing link when it comes to supporting those struggling with substance use.



Churches and places of worship are quick to show up when someone is physically ill or going through a tough time, but when it comes to addiction or mental health, the support can feel distant or even nonexistent. Stigma, lack of training, and confusion about how to help have left many people feeling left behind.

That's where the [Faith-Based Support Specialist program](#) (FBSS) comes in.

FBSS was born out of the simple thought that people often turn to their spiritual leaders first when they are in crisis. But many pastors and other faith leaders are not equipped with the tools to guide someone dealing with substance misuse. But, FBSS changes that.

FBSS provides education and training so that faith leaders can better understand substance use disorders and learn how to support, guide, and connect their congregants to the help they need.

So far, ASAP has certified over 400 faith leaders across Alabama. Now, thanks to a \$400,000 grant from the Foundation for Opioid Response Efforts (FORE), the FBSS program is expanding nationwide.

Instead of the full 16-hour training, ASAP is offering one-day, 8-hour introductory seminars in major cities across the country. The goal is to spread the message and build strong partnerships with leaders across the nation.

One of the first stops was New York City. FBSS plans to make multiple stops across the country to provide specialized training to faith leaders in hopes to reduce stigma and provide support to those in need.

To learn more or sign up, visit [www.fbss.asaprev.com](http://www.fbss.asaprev.com).







Special Agent Will Slater, Special Agent Vick Singh, and Director Joseph Rittner

# Staff Showcase: Office of Law Enforcement

**The Office of Law Enforcement Services, directed by Joseph Rittner, is proud to announce additions and promotions to the staff!**

The office welcomes Vick Singh as one of our newest Special Agents with the Bureau of Special Investigations. Special Agent Singh is assigned to our Community Division and will work with Special Agent Will Slater out of the Central Office.

Congratulations to John Conger as he has been promoted to Lieutenant. Lt. Conger is assigned to the Bureau of Police Services, Bryce Hospital Police Department where he has served for the past 5 ½ years. Great things are expected of Lt. Conger by Captain J. Benison and BPD personnel.

Also welcomed is Luther Davis as one of the newest Special Agents to join the Bureau of Special Investigation. SA Davis is assigned to the Tuscaloosa office where he will become our first BSI Canine Handler. SA Davis will be working with Special Agent Kevin McDaniel.

The Office of Law Enforcement Services also wishes to congratulate Blake Earnest as he has been promoted to Lieutenant. Lt. Earnest is assigned to the Bureau of Police Services, Taylor Hardin Police Department where he has served for the past 8 years. Great things are expected of Lt. Earnest by Captain M. Madden and THPD personnel.

We also welcome Russell Davis to ADMH. Davis is employed with Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility Police Department as MH Police Officer II (Lieutenant).



Captain J. Benison and Lieutenant John Conger



Director Joseph Rittner, Special Agent Luther Davis and Special Agent Kevin McDaniel



Lieutenant Blake Earnest and Captain Montoya Madden



Lieutenant Russell Davis and Captain Montoya Madden

# Congrats and Success

## IPS SERVICES

The Individual Placement and Support – Supported Employment (IPS) model has a network of practitioners known as the IPS Learning Community. This body consists of 26 states, 4 U.S. counties or jurisdictions, 7 countries and serves 18,665 plus, individuals. The Learning Community hosts an annual conference which is attended by practitioners from across the U.S. as well as Europe and other parts of the world (New Zealand).

This year, Kim Hammack and Jessica Hales were awarded the Rick Martinez Leadership Award recognizing their tireless work to bring IPS Supported Employment to Alabama. In the world of Supported Employment this is high praise indeed. Of all the states and countries practicing IPS, Alabama's leaders were singled out!

Alabama continued the evening of recognition, as Charles Haslerig, IPS – Certified Peer Specialist with Carastar – IPS was recognized as the Outstanding IPS Practitioner with lived experience. ADMH and providers are doing great things!

## JANICE WASHINGTON

Janice Washington graduated from the University of Alabama at Birmingham with her PhD on, May 2, 2025, and she was recently promoted to Director of Performance Improvement.

## AMBER SMITH

Amber Smith is the new Provider Enrollment and Training Specialist in the Autism Department. She has been with the Alabama Department of Mental Health in the Developmental Disabilities Division for about three and a half years.

## RENEE HINES

Renee Hines has recently earned her National Certification for Peer Recovery Support Specialist from the National Certification Commission for Addiction Professionals this May.



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Christina M. Costello, Amanda Somdal, and Brian A. Moss received awards at the COSDA (Council of Organizations Serving Deaf Alabamians) event on June 13.

## Congrats and Success

### DEAF SERVICES

Christina M. Costello, Amanda Somdal, and Brian A. Moss received awards at the COSDA (Council of Organizations Serving Deaf Alabamians) event on June 13.

### COSTELLO RECEIVED THE COSDA PROFESSIONAL AWARD

Awarded to an individual working in a professional or educational capacity serving Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Late Deafened or DeafBlind people who has demonstrated commitment to the field, fosters development and respect among peers and consumers.

### SOMDAL RECEIVED THE COSDA LEADERSHIP AWARD

Awarded to a Deaf or Hard of Hearing person who has demonstrated professional growth and outstanding leadership within the Deaf community.

### MOSS RECEIVED THE COSDA SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY AWARD

Awarded to an individual or organization providing exemplary service to Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Late Deafened or DeafBlind people over the past 12 months.

## Death Announcements

Frances Lee Vaughan, ADMH, Registered Nurse II, passed away on Tuesday, April 29, 2025, in Tuscaloosa, AL. Fran was a dedicated and respected employee at Bryce Hospital.

Curtis Lee Robinson, ADMH, retired Habilitation Treatment Specialist, passed away on Monday, May 5, 2025, at DCH Regional Medical Center in Tuscaloosa, AL. Curtis was a dedicated, respected, and loved employee at Bryce Hospital from April 12, 1972, to his retirement date of August 1, 2013.

Rose Johnson, ADMH, retired Mental Health Worker I, passed away on Sunday, June 22, 2025, at Hospice of West Alabama. Rose was a loved and dedicated employee at Bryce Hospital from March 1, 2012, to her retirement date of January 1, 2023.

**Grief Counseling for ADMH staff remains available through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), managed by Behavioral Health Systems, Inc. (BHS). Staff can directly contact BHS at 800-245-1150 or 205-879-1150.**

**Serve.**  
**Empower.**  
**Support.**

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**ADMH**  
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of Mental Health  
connecting mind and wellness