

The Outlook

Alabama Department of Mental Health Newsletter



Justice-Involved Veterans Turn their Lived Experiences into Lifelines as Certified Recovery Support Specialist (CRSS)

Inside an Alabama correctional facility, a group of veterans is proving that past mistakes do not have to define the future.

Through a partnership with the Alabama Department of Mental Health's Office of Peer Programs, men in the Veterans Alliance Logistical Operations Reintegration (VALOR) program are completing training to become certified peer support and recovery specialists. The program uses the power of shared life experiences to help these men support one another behind bars while building a clear path toward meaningful careers and community service when they go home.

For many of the men, taking the initial 12-week, 60-hour course was a major turning point. Beyond learning new skills, it gave them a renewed sense of purpose and a way to turn their own hard life lessons into help for others. As one participant shared, "This VALOR group has been the most fulfilling thing that I've done since I've been in prison... Being able to help other veterans and being able to try to outreach... It's the first step on that journey." Because they share both military backgrounds and similar struggles, these men build trust quickly with their peers in ways traditional programs often cannot.

Their goals reach well beyond the prison walls. Many plan to work within the Veterans Affairs system, study social work, or become substance use counselors after their release. They are already planning community service projects, from packing meals for the homeless to speaking with troubled youth to help them choose a better path.

This effort fits into Alabama's long history of valuing peer support, which first began in state facilities back in 1994. Today, the Office of Peer Programs works to make sure the real voices of people who have lived through recovery are at the heart of care across the state.

The Office of Peer Programs leads this effort by promoting peer leadership, providing official certification pathways, and expanding peer-driven initiatives statewide. Peer specialists play a critical, unique role in the recovery process not as clinical care providers, but as living proof that long-term recovery is possible. By sharing their own lived experiences with mental health challenges or substance use, peers build authentic trust, reduce stigma, offer practical coping strategies, and walk alongside individuals as they navigate their personal healing journeys.

Once certified, these specialists apply their unique insights across a wide variety of professional settings. Examples of where certified peer specialists work include community mental health centers, hospital emergency departments, mobile crisis teams, recovery drop-in centers, Veterans Affairs (VA) clinics, and re-entry or correctional transition programs.

For more information on certification, training, or peer initiatives, <https://mh.alabama.gov/division-of-mental-health-substance-abuse-services/peer-programs/>.



Empowering Youth: ADMH and Partners Launch Statewide Youth Tobacco-Free Recovery Initiative

The Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH) has joined forces with the Alabama Medicaid Agency and the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) to launch the [Youth Tobacco-Free Recovery Initiative](#). Designed for youth and young adults ages 18 to 24, this cross-agency effort focuses on promoting commercial tobacco and nicotine-free lifestyles alongside mental health and substance use recovery.

By integrating tobacco and vaping cessation support into existing behavioral health programs, the initiative equips providers with practical tools and evidence-based strategies to help young people quit. Partner agencies plan to highlight these resources through the end of the year and maintain them as a recurring feature during upcoming substance use awareness events statewide.

This initiative holds special significance this month as communities prepare for Red Ribbon Week (October 23–31), the nation's largest drug and substance use prevention campaign. As Alabama celebrates Red Ribbon Week and highlights drug-free living, ADMH and its state partners are using the momentum to empower youth, reduce nicotine dependence, and support long-term wellness across the state.

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Want to be included in the next issue?

Send us your stories, achievements and events!

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ADMH Staff Show off the School Spirit!



Strengthening Forensic Partnerships: Highlights from ADMH's Recent Forensic Services Training

The Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH) Office of Forensic Mental Health Services recently hosted a training session focused on expanded resources and collaborative efforts to improve the state's forensic mental health system.

Led by ADMH Staff members Dr. Virginia Scott-Adams and Kelly Emerson, the interactive session brought together law enforcement, jail staff, social workers, and attorneys to discuss key system updates and strategies for helping justice-involved individuals.

The primary focus of the training was detailing ADMH's work to shorten wait times for forensic evaluations and competency restoration. Presenters shared how administrative updates are helping support individuals in local custody while they await services, alongside physical capacity expansions like the 80-bed addition at Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility. By improving communication with local courts and expanding jail-based treatment and outpatient restoration options, the department is working to ensure individuals receive care as efficiently as possible.

To better bridge the gap between local courts and mental health providers, the session highlighted the rollout of the Forensic Navigator Program. These navigators act as hands-on coordinators who work directly within local systems to identify mental health diversion opportunities, connect individuals to community care, and collaborate with county initiatives like Stepping Up to keep individuals from remaining in local jails solely while awaiting treatment.

The session also featured the integration of Peer Support Specialists, who work alongside Forensic Navigators to guide individuals through recovery and legal obligations. Bringing their own lived recovery experience, peers serve as relatable guides who facilitate "warm handoffs" upon release from jail and assist with practical steps like attending appointments at local mental health centers or community. These coordinated efforts showcase how strong partnerships are building a more responsive forensic system across Alabama.



Making a Difference Together through the State Combined Campaign

Every year, state employees are given a unique opportunity to give back to communities and charities.

This annual workplace-giving initiative offers state employees the chance to donate to hundreds of charitable organizations, ranging from local community health clinics and animal shelters to statewide relief funds and national non-profits.

Employees retain full control over where their money goes. Even a pledge of just a few dollars per pay period creates a steady stream of vital funding that non-profits can rely on year-round.

Dr. Martin Luther King once said that "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

Dr. King reminded us that the strength of any community ultimately relies on our willingness to lift one another up. Participating in the State Combined Campaign is a simple yet profoundly meaningful answer to that very question.

When thousands of employees come together, individual acts of generosity combine into a powerful force that changes lives, strengthens families, and builds a bright, more supportive future for everyone.



GIVING TODAY, CHANGING TOMORROW.

How UAB's CAPP Program and ADMH Improve Maternal Mental Health

The Comprehensive Addiction in Pregnancy Program (CAPP) at UAB Medicine serves as a vital lifeline for expecting and new mothers navigating substance use disorders.

Recognizing that pregnant women face unique medical and emotional challenges, CAPP provides specialized care that combines prenatal and postpartum medical management with addiction treatment, including medications for opioid use disorder, in a compassionate, judgment-free environment.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health (ADMH) partners closely with programs like CAPP to strengthen the state's safety net for maternal and child health. Through grant funding, statewide service coordination, and integration with local community mental health providers, ADMH helps ensure mothers receiving care at UAB can seamlessly access community-based peer support, social services, and long-term recovery resources in their home counties.



Bolstering Faith-Based Capacity in Substance Abuse Prevention

Congratulations to the [Agency for Substance Abuse Prevention \(ASAP\)](#)'s [Faith-Based Support Specialist \(FBSS\)](#) certification program!

Faith leaders have always been trusted voices in their communities. People and families turn to them in hard times. Now, thanks to new supplemental funding from SAMHSA's [Center for Substance Abuse Prevention \(CSAP\)](#), that trust is being turned into a powerful tool on the front lines of the fight against substance abuse.

Before this funding, faith communities in Alabama had the relationships and the reach, but not always the tools, training, or formal partnerships to plug into statewide prevention efforts. SAMHSA saw an opportunity to give these communities the resources to turn long-standing trust into life-saving prevention.

In Alabama, the momentum is already impressive. The [Agency for Substance Abuse Prevention \(ASAP\)](#) runs a 16-hour [Faith-Based Support Specialist \(FBSS\)](#) certification program, approved by the [Alabama Department of Mental Health](#) to train faith leaders to recognize and respond to mental health and substance use challenges.

Since launching in March 2022, the [FBSS](#) program has hosted conferences in every region of the state and certified more than 600 faith leaders. The new SAMHSA supplemental funds will power regional needs assessment to explore how faith-based prevention shapes youth attitudes, and where additional resources are needed.

The [Alabama Department of Mental Health](#), [Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services \(KDADS\)](#), and the [West Virginia Dept. of Human Services, Bureau for Behavioral Health](#) are Strategic Prevention Framework—Partnerships for Success (SPF-PFS) state grantees.



Holiday Recipes

Main Dishes & Soups

WHITE CHILI

Mary Ogden | Commissioner's Office

Pairs Great With: Bolillos rolls

Ingredients:

4-5 chicken breasts, cooked and finely cubed
2 cans (15 oz each) Great Northern beans
2 cans of chopped green chilies
32 oz chicken broth
1-2 cups of water
2 tsp ground cumin (or to taste)

Toppings:

2 cups Mozzarella or Italian cheese blend (finely shredded)

Instructions:

1. In a large pot, combine the cubed chicken, Great Northern beans, green chilies, chicken broth, water, and cumin.
2. Bring the mixture to a boil over medium-high heat, then reduce heat and simmer until ready to serve.
3. Ladle into bowls, top generously with shredded cheese, and stir to melt. Serve warm with Bolillos rolls.

Beverages

APPLE CIDER PUNCH

Cheryl Lewis | Fiscal Manager III

Yield:

8 servings

Ingredients:

6 cups apple cider
1 cup orange juice
½ cup lemon juice
1 liter ginger ale

Garnishes:

Apple slices, orange slices, and maraschino cherries

Instructions:

1. In a large pitcher or punch bowl, combine apple cider, orange juice, and lemon juice. Chill until ready to serve.
2. Just before serving, stir in 1 liter of ginger ale.
3. Pour into glasses over ice and garnish with fresh fruit slices and cherries.

Why It's Special:

"It tastes good!"



Side Dishes

GRANDMOTHER'S YUMMY CORNBREAD DRESSING

Sondra Phillips | Habilitation/Treatment Coordinator III

Yield:

10-15 servings

Ingredients:

2 cast-iron skilletts of baked cornbread, cooled
3-4 slices day-old white sandwich bread, torn into pieces
1 large onion, chopped
3-4 ribs celery, chopped
2 tbsp butter (for sautéing)
1-2 large boxes chicken stock
1 large can cream of chicken soup
2-3 tbsp poultry seasoning
½ to 1 tbsp ground sage
Salt and black pepper, to taste
2-3 raw eggs
2-3 hard-boiled eggs, chopped
2 chicken breasts, cooked and shredded/chopped

Instructions:

1. Prep the Base: Crumble the cornbread into small pieces in a large mixing bowl; mix in the torn sandwich bread.
2. Sauté Vegetables: Sauté the chopped onion and celery in butter until tender, then add to the bread mixture.
3. Season & Wet: Season with poultry seasoning, sage, salt, and pepper. Stir in the chicken stock and cream of chicken soup until the mixture reaches a loose, soupy consistency (this prevents dry dressing).
4. Add Eggs: Stir in the raw eggs until combined, then gently fold in the chopped hard-boiled eggs. Pro Tip: For the best flavor, cover and refrigerate the mixture overnight before baking!
5. Bake: Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Pour into a large baking dish and bake for 15 minutes or until just starting to set.
6. Add Chicken: Remove from oven, scatter shredded chicken across the top, and gently press it into the dressing. Return to the oven and bake for an additional 30-45 minutes until the center is just set.

Why It's Special:

"We had Grandmother's dressing at every Thanksgiving and Christmas. My granddaddy would help by chopping the onions and celery. After they passed, my mother and I took up the task, and now I make it every holiday. It's a cherished tradition."

SWEET POTATO CASSEROLE

Lisa Scott | Administrator II

Yield:

12 servings

Ingredients:

2 large cans sweet potatoes, drained
1 ¼ cups granulated sugar
½ cup milk
½ cup melted butter
1 ½ tsp vanilla extract
2 large eggs

Toppings:

½ cup all-purpose flour
⅔ tsp salt
2 tbsp melted butter
½ cup chopped pecans (optional)
1 pkg (10 oz) miniature marshmallows (optional)

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Lightly coat a 9x11-inch baking dish with cooking spray.
2. Make the Base: Beat the sweet potatoes, sugar, milk, melted butter, vanilla, and eggs with an electric mixer until smooth. Pour into the prepared baking dish.
3. Make the Topping: Whisk together flour, salt, 2 tbsp melted butter, and pecans (if using). Sprinkle evenly over the sweet potato mixture.
4. Bake: Bake uncovered at 350°F for 25 minutes.
5. Add Marshmallows: Remove from oven, sprinkle marshmallows across the top, and bake for an additional 5 minutes (or until marshmallows are golden brown).

Why It's Special:

"I combined several recipes to create what I felt was the perfect version! My family loves it. I only put pecans on half because a few family members don't care for them."

Side Dishes continued

CORN CASSEROLE

Lisa Scott | Administrator II

Yield:

8-10 servings

Ingredients:

1 can whole kernel corn, drained
1 can creamed corn
1 container (8 oz) sour cream
1 egg
1 pkg Jiffy Honey-Flavor Cornbread Mix
1 stick (½ cup) butter or margarine, melted

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C).
2. In a casserole dish, combine the drained corn, creamed corn, sour cream, egg, Jiffy cornbread mix, and melted butter. (Note: Take care not to pour hot butter directly onto the egg to prevent scrambling!)
3. Mix ingredients thoroughly until smooth.
4. Bake for 1 hour or until the top is set and golden brown.

Why It's Special:

"Every time I ask my daughter what to bring to an event, she and my grandsons ask for this corn casserole. My daughter even shared it with her in-laws, and they make it every holiday too!"

Desserts

PUMPKIN BREAD

Debra Florea

Yield:

3 loaf pans (9x5 inch)

Ingredients:

3 cups canned pumpkin puree
1 ½ cups vegetable oil
4 cups granulated white sugar
6 large eggs
4 ¾ cups all-purpose flour
1 ½ tsp baking powder
1 ½ tsp baking soda
1 ½ tsp salt
1 ½ tsp ground cinnamon
1 ½ tsp ground nutmeg
1 ½ tsp ground cloves

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease and flour three 9x5-inch loaf pans.
2. In a large bowl, whisk together the pumpkin puree, vegetable oil, sugar, and eggs until smooth.
3. In a separate bowl, sift or whisk together flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves.
4. Gradually stir the dry ingredients into the pumpkin mixture until fully blended.
5. Divide batter evenly between the three prepared loaf pans.
6. Bake for 45 to 60 minutes. The top of the loaves should spring back when lightly pressed, or a toothpick inserted near the center should come out clean.



Desserts continued

BROWN BUTTER PECAN PRALINE POKE CAKE

Sondra Phillips | Habilitation/Treatment Coordinator III

Yield:

1 cake (8-12 servings)

Ingredients:

1 box butter pecan cake mix (plus required box ingredients)

1 can (14 oz) sweetened condensed milk

1 jar (12 oz) caramel ice cream topping

1 cup chopped pecans

½ cup butter

1 cup light brown sugar

½ cup heavy cream

1 tsp vanilla extract

Instructions:

1. Bake Cake: Prepare and bake the butter pecan cake mix in a 9x13-inch baking dish according to package instructions.
2. Poke & Fill: While the cake is still warm, use the handle of a wooden spoon to poke holes across the cake. Pour sweetened condensed milk evenly over top, allowing it to soak into the holes. Drizzle caramel topping over the cake next.
3. Praline Sauce: Melt ½ cup butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Stir in brown sugar and heavy cream; bring to a boil for 2-3 minutes until slightly thickened. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla extract and chopped pecans.
4. Finish & Cool: Pour the warm praline sauce evenly over the top of the cake. Allow to cool completely before serving.

Why It's Special:

"We always had pecan trees in our yard growing up and used them in lots of dishes, so this recipe always reminds me of home!"

BELLE'S STRAWBERRY BANANA PUDDING

Zondria B. Young | Account Admin II

Yield:

12 servings

Ingredients:

1 family-size box instant vanilla pudding mix

1 box Nilla Wafers

1 can (14 oz) sweetened condensed milk

1 tub (8 oz) whipped topping (e.g., Cool Whip)

1 cup milk (or as needed)

Fresh bananas, sliced

Fresh strawberries, sliced

Instructions:

1. Slice strawberries and bananas; set aside.
2. In a large bowl, whisk together instant pudding mix, sweetened condensed milk, and half of the whipped topping. Add milk as needed to loosen the texture.
3. In a 9x13-inch dish, layer Nilla Wafers, pudding mixture, and alternating slices of strawberries and bananas. Repeat layers as desired.
4. Spread remaining whipped topping over the top layer and sprinkle with crushed Nilla Wafers. Garnish with fresh fruit slices.
5. Chill & Serve: Refrigerate for 6+ hours for a soft, cake-like texture, or serve within 4 hours if you prefer extra crunch from the wafers!

Why It's Special:

"Even though this is a go-to summer dessert, it's how we keep summer alive in the fall! It is quick, easy, and delicious."



Staff Events, Conferences and Celebrations!



**DANITRA TOLBERT, LEOLA ROGERS, CEDRIC HARRISON,
KIYARRA HAIRSTON & SUNDRA MCKEITHEN**

The Office of Contracts and Purchasing attended the Procurement Expo to learn the latest about policies and procedures!

Brandon Folks attended the National Governors Association as a panelist to discussed what states look for in a technology partner, where the friction points typically arise, and what both sectors can do to build partnerships that outlast the pilot phase.



BRANDON FOLKS



**STEPHANIE LOGAN, DALLAS RABIG,
BETH JONES
& SARAH-ELLEN THOMPSON**

Alabama was one of the 42 states invited to learn alongside ZERO TO THREE's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Policy Team at the IECMH Financing Policy Project Convening held in Minneapolis, Minnesota last month. Representing our state team are: Stephanie Logan (Alabama Medicaid), Dallas Rabig (Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education), **Beth Jones** (Alabama Department of Mental Health), **Sarah-Ellen S. Thompson** (Alabama Department of Mental Health).

Serve.
Empower.
Support.

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ADMH
Alabama Department
of Mental Health
connecting mind and wellness