Meeting Notes – Jun. 6, 2023

The LaFayette Rotary club met on Tuesday, June 6, for its weekly meeting. TR Clark was responsible for the program and had invited Emily Gipson (pictured second from left). Mrs. Gipson is a retired therapist and member of the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI). She is also a co-facilitator of Family to Family, a NAMI initiative and educational program for family and friends of those with mental illness. Ms. Gipson brought with her Mr. Jimmie Dickey (pictured on the left), executive director, and CEO of East Alabama Mental Health; Chase Higgins (pictured second from the right), a patrol officer with the Opelika Police Department (OPD); and Chief Healey (pictured on the right) of the OPD to speak on a community alliance and Crisis Intervention Team that they have formed to address how law enforcement deals with individuals with mental illness.

Jimmie Dickey spoke first about East Alabama Mental Health (EAMH), which serves Lee, Russell, Chambers, and Tallapoosa Counties. It has the fifth largest catchment area in the state, with more than 25 locations and serving more than 9,000 clients annually. They provide services in the area of mental illness, developmental disabilities and substance abuse. They operate on a $30 million dollar budget and are a separate entity from the hospital in Opelika. He stressed that they serve anyone who meets the criteria for a serious mental illness, regardless of the person's ability to pay. Last year they provided $2.6 million dollars' worth of uncompensated care.

He also discussed the big problems that jails, and emergency rooms face when dealing with persons with mental illness (MI). Neither are really equipped or trained to meet the needs. A place is needed for persons with MI to go to receive the proper treatment and care. Currently, the nearest crisis center is in Montgomery. There are four in the state: Montgomery, Birmingham, Mobile and Huntsville. Here is where a program adopted by the Opelika Police Department (OPD) is trying to help.

Chase Higgins, a patrol officer with OPD, initiated the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) in 2022. The CIT is composed of law enforcement, mental health, and advocates (families of and those with mental illness. These three groups cooperate and collaborate to provide a continuum of care. One aspect of the CIT is to provide training to police officers to recognize and deal more appropriately with mental illness.

Chief Healey of the OPD has served 32 years in law enforcement. He contrasted the way officers are now taught to deal with mental illness with the way they were taught when he first began his career. Back then they were taught to go along with the person’s delusions. They now know that is not the appropriate response. To emphasize the prevalence of the issue of mental illness and law enforcement, he shared that in the first 75 days of 2023, there were 66 calls for services involving mental illness in Opelika.

Prior to the formation of CIT, each agency was working in isolation. Now they are working together. CIT fits into the Together Opelika campaign, which is geared to build trust and relationships between the Opelika community and the OPD officers. Congress has charged local municipalities with the responsibility of solving their own mental health crises but has provided no funding for the mandate. CIT has received a grant from Substance Abuse and Mental Health to divert people with MI from the criminal justice system to mental health treatment. One of the next steps for the CIT program is to integrate with threat assessment. There are usually indicators prior to a significant event, and if these are more easily recognizable, through training, then the events may be averted.

LaFayette's chief of police, George Rampey, and a representative from the Chambers County Sheriff's department, TJ Wood, along with Julia Ann Hyde, director of the Department of Human Resources were also in attendance at this program.

Diane Sherriff