

## Practicing For Picture Day: Four Women Creating and Coordinating Resources

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You would be surprised how similar trying to coordinate community resources can be to taking a good picture of twenty toddlers. Or at least, that's the image that leapt to mind when I was talking with leaders working to link resources for substance use issues with mental health across Walker County. Here's what I mean by my analogy: even if half of the kids are smiling at you, the other half isn't facing the camera at all; and once you get that half looking and get back in place the others are crying or crawling around. Getting the result you want will take a lot of work. Luckily for Walker County, there are leaders preparing a way to better coordinate these resources – even if it is occasionally moving at toddler's pace.

Rachel Puckett, the director of [The Healing Network of Walker County \(HNWC\)](#), and I were talking while enjoying some Lavish caffeine one morning and my brain made that connection to kids when she said, "If people aren't interested and there aren't opportunities, you're just going to keep beating your head against the wall trying to make that thing happen." It might've been a bit of a leap, but if you try to take that picture and listen to what some leaders in the community working to address these challenges say, you'll see what I mean.

The meeting I had with Puckett was one of the many I scheduled to learn more about the ways mental health resources were being connected to individuals with substance use issues in Walker County. When asked about her work, Puckett told me her responsibilities "include keeping partners communicating, coordinating, collaborating and facilitating that in

different ways ... identifying how to marry community need with opportunities and interests and finding the perfect mix where you can say 'we need this thing to happen.'"

When it comes to connecting mental health resources, The Healing Network is where it is at. Puckett explained that their goal "is to create a comprehensive network of prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery resources related to mental and substance use disorders." When we got to the topic of struggles HNWC has had, Puckett mentioned, "the biggest challenge that I've faced here is when we're trying to push and improve some treatments and systems, the decision makers in some critical places do not care to hear it."

Apart from having to vie for the support of leaders, organizations like The Healing Network are having to really advocate for more resources too. There isn't much to do with that interest when there is "one mental health provider per 910 people registered in Walker County, Alabama" according to [County Health Rankings](#). Puckett's work at HNWC is aimed at bringing that number down. Puckett said, "I try to fill in the trifecta and create more resources for the community."

On a different day, but at the same coffee shop and table, I met with Paige Britton, who is the founder and front runner of her new community center, [The Recovery Den](#). She noted that, "working with agencies that I've worked in in the last 5 years, you see where gaps are filled and where there's still so much lacking. And nobody fills in the gap of the mental health aspect of it." Thankfully for people like Puckett, that gap will be shrunk as much as possible to get everyday people the help that they need. Britton has set her sights on filling that gap, and others too, in her own way. She told me, "For the last 5 years, I've wanted to start my own recovery-based community center," and the community will feel the effect of that dream fast.

Among the things her community center will be, she said, “My long-term goal for The Recovery Den is to have social workers for case management ... that are boots on the ground, because ... even people in recovery that are doing well need that counseling as a prevention from relapse. And they can’t get it because even just paying a \$25 pay scale fee means either they’re not going to have gas for the week, the power bill doesn’t get paid, or, you know, they fall behind in some sense.”

To do as much good as possible, Britton set a wide scope for The Recovery Den. She said, “I don’t want the Recovery Den to be just that one service, where if we ever see a need in Walker County, that we say ‘no, we don’t help with that’. If it comes to a point where we see a need that’s consistent, maybe we can’t help it right now, but let’s see what we can do. There’s going to be things that are non-substance use, non-mental health related that I won’t be able to touch on ... but this is a huge problem.”

From her personal, hands-on experience Britton noted that, “I met so many people in recovery and was part of their recovery. They can’t afford counseling. They have really good jobs, and they can’t afford that \$25 pay scale fee. And I get it, I was there myself.”

Though she’s faced numerous challenges, Britton specifically added that, “Most of us in recovery have fines and other things and a lot of us don’t have family that can help. We still have so much lacking in that area to where judges, lawyers, cops, the community itself – community leaders are not educated well enough [on substance-use disorder recovery], and nobody is touching on it.” In this way, Britton and Puckett seem to be able to relate.

To Britton, the community needs to be more curious about the circumstances of people in need, like, “what keeps causing relapse? What do we have in place for people to prevent relapse, other than support groups?”

To gain more information on these questions Britton posed, it helped to look back on an interview I did with Romalyn Aaron, who is an experienced trauma and substance use counselor in Jasper. Aaron is working with [Healing And Responding To Trauma \(HARTT\)](#) as one of their head counselors while also volunteering at the [Veterans Association \(VA\)](#) in her free time.

In Aaron’s experience she noted that, “there’s a lot of parents out there that never really processed their own traumas, and their children will continue to go through the same cycle unless we educate the parents. If we can teach the parents to see that there is a better world out there, that there’s a different way of thinking than what they’ve been brought up to think, that it can change that cycle.”

When it comes to how people are parenting, Aaron points out that, “people across here say that their parents did that and their parents before them did that, but what are we doing to change that. What are we going to do to break the cycle. Let’s educate. We can educate the kids as much as we can, however it all depends on what’s being done at home to enforce those things that are being taught.”

What stuck with me the most from Aaron was when she told me, “Mental health issues, substance use issues, and trauma, are all connected, so we need to not only focus on the kids and families but what’s causing these all.” Leave it to a licensed therapist to leave you with the big problems that keep you awake at night.

When I went to speak to Deborah Quinn, the executive director of [Hope For Women](#), I left feeling like she was getting at a part of what Aaron was alluding to. Quinn told me, “It takes a village. I can't do it all and I know that, so I try to partner them up while they're walking out recovery in a safe zone here at Hope House.”

Quinn made it clear that it wasn't always easy to do what she does though. I was surprised when she admittedly said, “I was volunteering, and they asked me to come in to help out people with substance use issues, and my first thought was, ‘okay, why am I going there. If you struggle with addiction, you chose to be an addict or alcoholic.’”

For Quinn, she realized, “That was my mindset because I hadn't been around it. So, when I came in and taught and listened, and really listened because you must be a good listener in this, and I heard their stories and leave so overwhelmed and only thought: ‘no wonder... no wonder.’”

Quinn came out of it choosing a better path. She told me that, “During that part of 2014 I was truly taught unconditional love and the reality of these people's lives.”

To do the best for the women she helps at Hope House, Quinn provides as much support as she can. She mentioned a few of her programs, saying, “The Recovery Resource Center comes in to provide peer support because these ladies have walked through addiction. They're coming in and teaching classes on things like trauma responses and grounding while giving them techniques to stay in the present. We also go to Capstone for physician care, but also provide the girls additional counseling through them as we are able. Other programs we use are the [12 Step](#) program in the house, the 12 weeks [Celebrate Recovery](#) course, and a recovery resource class every Sunday. One of the bigger things we do in the program is a curriculum

called The Genesis Project that takes about 7 months to go through and is half spiritually oriented and half clinically oriented.”

Quinn didn’t hold back on her secrets of her programming though. Part of her process was, she said, “Me going to other organizations in Walker County and going into their meetings and sitting there and listening to what they can offer in mental health, I think, is bridging that gap between mental health services and substance use issues; and it starts with us taking those steps. I am very open to allowing them to come through our doors.”

Concerning her work and that of her partners, she told me, “That’s a huge thing with us: trying to bridge the gap, not being scared as organizations to work with one another, and realizing that we’re all trying to do the same thing.” And that's the same message these meetings have continued to come to for me it seems.

Quinn couldn’t have put it better for me when she denoted that for herself, “As a leader, you have to be very teachable. What worked for me, what worked five years ago, is not going to work today because the world, drugs, and mental health are all changing.”

All these amazing women in Walker County are working to bridge the gaps in mental health services that those affected by rampant cycles of poverty are missing. Their visions and perspectives on the community vary in how they present, but they all shout the same messages to me. Learning from their passion and experience had me excited to see them bring their love and mastery into their community. Now to bring my attention back to this toddler picture dilemma. I’m thinking it could be good to try and grab their attention with snacks....

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