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NEW COMMUNITY PLATFORM TO TRANSFORM HEALTH OUTCOMES THROUGH IMPROVED COORDINATION OF PHYSICAL, BEHAVIORAL & SOCIAL CARE REFERRALS

Stark County, OH (November 10, 2025) – In a testament to the collaborative spirit of Stark County foundations, healthcare entities, local government, and various not-for-profit organizations and social service agencies, a comprehensive system designed to improve the overall health and wellness of Stark County residents is in its first stages of launch.

“In my 30-plus year career, this is the most significant show of support among so many different organizations,” said John Aller, executive director of Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery (StarkMHAR). “The Sisters of Charity Foundation, North Canton Medical Foundation, Aultman Health System, the Timken Foundation of Canton, the City of Canton, the United Way of Greater Stark County, and Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery all came to the table willing to listen to a bold new idea, and ultimately, this support is a big part of how this is even possible for our county,” he continued.

In 2019, StarkMHAR, Aultman Health System, and the Stark County Educational Service Center agreed to fund the addition of a Chief Health Integration Officer position shared between the three entities. The original goal of this position was to research, coordinate, and lead collaborative efforts around behavioral health. On Aug. 1, 2020, Dr. Anju Mader, MD started in this role.

“The challenges faced by community members when accessing vital healthcare and non-medical services are complex, but our commitment to the residents of Stark County is unwavering,” said Anju Mader, MD, Chief Health Integration Officer and Director of ConnectWell CIE of East Central Ohio.

Upon Mader’s hiring, two large-scale objectives were determined: First, there was a need to bring physical and behavioral healthcare providers together to look at different models designed to increase access. Second, various sectors needed to hold conversations about addressing the social drivers of health. Social drivers are the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age. They affect a wide range of a person’s quality of life, including health, regardless of the apparent availability of healthcare. For example, if healthcare is available but a person lacks the transportation to get to an appointment, that care isn’t realistically available to them.

Community conversations in this arena were held, and in June 2022, the “[Voices of Stark County Report](#)” was released. It contains information on seven months’ worth of facilitated group meetings, organized by school district. A major takeaway from the conversations was the need and desire for a ***unified system of wrap around services, resources, and referrals in a person-centered continuum of care framework***. This is known as a community information exchange (CIE).

Using the Voices of Stark County Report directive as a starting point, Dr. Mader completed a feasibility study with the consulting firm HealthCare Perspective. Furthermore, as part of due diligence, a social return on investment analysis was completed by Ohio University’s Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs. Overall, findings supported the idea that a CIE could be successful in Stark County.

CIEs have been implemented by other states and counties, including Summit County. For Stark County, five social care vendors were interviewed, and Unite Us was chosen as the ideal platform to meet local needs.

“ConnectWell CIE of East Central Ohio provides the essential infrastructure to connect dedicated service providers through the utilization of Unite Us’ platform, streamline referrals, and ensure individuals receive the comprehensive support they need to thrive,” explained Dr. Mader.

An example of the purpose of a CIE is: A person living in Canton may visit a food pantry for food needs. If that person also has a physical or behavioral health issue that they express at the food pantry, the pantry may be able to offer a brochure or give a phone number to call, but the burden to connect to that help is on the person in need. Through Stark County’s CIE, ConnectWell CIE of East Central Ohio, any connected partner can screen for needs, place a “need for referral” message in the system, and another partner with those resources can reach out – reversing the burden to the resource, not the person.

As more people have quick and easy access to help that addresses their needs, Stark County will experience better overall health outcomes and community vitality. Research from Ohio University indicates that removing barriers for 10% of Stark County residents who need mental health treatment, substance use treatment, housing, transportation, and nutrition support could generate over \$19.3 million in healthcare savings in one year.

Goodwill Industries of Greater Cleveland and East Central Ohio has been named ConnectWell CIE’s administrator and fiscal agent. The current focus is on engaging as many partners as possible so there will be an abundance of resources to fulfill referrals that are placed. On Nov. 4 the system went live and individuals can be connected; capacity will increase as more partners are added.

“ConnectWell CIE is an important step in better connecting people in our community to the resources they need. This new endeavor underscores Goodwill’s commitment to partnership that creates meaningful impact for people in our community. We are proud to partner with so many remarkable organizations that made ConnectWell possible,” said Mark Trew, COO, Goodwill Industries of Greater Cleveland and East Central Ohio.

“Aultman Health System is proud to support this community-wide initiative that strengthens connections between referring organizations and community-based resources. By working together, we can help ensure that individuals receive the comprehensive services they need to improve their health and well-being,” added Kevin Pete, SVP, Aultman Health System.

For more information, visit www.goodwillgoodskills.org/connectwell/.

About Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery

Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery (StarkMHAR) is the county “Board.” The role of county boards is to plan, evaluate, and fund mental health and addiction services locally by contracting with a wide range of providers for prevention, treatment and recovery support for their community members. Additionally, StarkMHAR regularly looks for areas that need special attention, and makes plans to address those. Learn more about what’s happening now at www.StarkMHAR.org.

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