

Florida State leading effort to provide effective treatment and improved outcomes for addictions and mental health



Heather Flynn is chair of the College of Medicine's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine.

The Florida State University Colleges of Medicine and Social Work, with support from Tallahassee business leader and philanthropist Rick Kearney, are developing plans to tackle widespread mental health and substance use issues across the Big Bend.

"Everywhere you look this is a problem," said Heather Flynn, chair of the College of Medicine's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine and a member of the governor's Statewide Task Force on Opioid Abuse. "Homelessness and poverty are often closely connected to these matters, but the good news is we can do something about it. We do not have to stand by and wait for others to find solutions."

The partnership is taking a multifaceted approach, capitalizing on the expertise of multiple FSU researchers in the health and social work fields as well as private partners engaged in these issues.

Kearney, who developed low-cost housing solutions in Tallahassee to counter a growing local problem with homelessness and a shortage of decent

and affordable housing, is funding a feasibility/needs-assessment study that began July 1. Simultaneously, university researchers are drawing up plans for an innovative clinical and social services program.

“Here in Tallahassee, we serve over 600 disadvantaged people day and night with a variety of housing and healthy food options,” Kearney said. “A majority of our clients struggle with substance abuse, mental health issues, physical health challenges and often a combination thereof. There is no long-term rehab program for low-income, disadvantaged people who need it desperately. We hope that this model will serve as a template for communities across our nation to reverse the frightening growth of these societal afflictions.”

Last year, 17 people a day in Florida died from opioid overdose. Additionally, non-fatal overdoses cost the state \$31.8 billion for health care, substance use treatment, criminal justice, lost productivity and reduced quality of life, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

FSU researchers, Kearney and others will unveil details of the plan in September while continuing to pursue additional funding sources.

Jim Clark, dean of the FSU College of Social Work, said the university is proud to work on this initiative and put its expertise to use in helping the community.

“Clinical social workers are crucial for the delivery of evidence-based, multidisciplinary approaches to addiction, and the profession is deeply engaged in the areas of substance abuse prevention, education and research,” Clark said. “We are excited about this partnership with the College of Medicine and grateful to Rick Kearney for inspiring and investing in this initiative.”