

FOR THE RECORD

Your newspaper

To paraphrase Samuel Clemmons, reports of the death of newspapers have been greatly exaggerated.

In our opinion, there has been all too much gnashing of teeth and lamenting over the fix that some papers find themselves in. The word “some” in the last sentence being all-important. Most papers are much more like the one you have in your hands — a small weekly with local or regional ownership. And although the economy has not been kind to them, most are in decent shape and many are downright profitable.

What is dying – or, more accurately, unraveling – is the business model that drove media consolidation. The movement, which rolled many privately owned small and mid-sized metro dailies into ever-growing newspaper chains, may have made sense on the upside, but there has been hell to pay on the downside.

The public-owned companies that were built by consolidation are by nature beholden to their shareholders and, as they unravel, the idea that papers are an integral part of the communities they serve is, well, a nice thought but not much of a revenue generator. As the debt burden that many of these chains are under continues to sap resources, the emphasis has not been on the poor decision making that led to the chains’ unhealthy buying sprees. No, what we hear about is how the industry is struggling to keep readers as ad sales continue to shrink. (That assessment usually precedes another round of “necessary” staff cuts.)

As a testament to the power of papers, this is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Oh, and a vicious cycle too. We wish they’d stop poor mouthing. It’s making it hard on the rest of us.

Thank you for reading  
our newspaper and  
making it your own.

Reporters and ad reps of papers all over — even those that are doing well — are having the woes and bleak futures of newspapers played back to them by sources and clients. And there are some people who are relishing the imminent demise of the printed product. It may be a while before that happens though.

Those who know the story of the founding of this newspaper may recall that one of the things that spurred us on was a survey by a group of Carolina students that found that even here — in one of the most wired and net-friendly towns in the Southeast — the desire for a printed newspaper was strong.

Our experience over the past two years has underlined that finding and added an exclamation point. Few things are more satisfying than watching someone stop at a newsbox and say to the person they’re with “I need to get *my Citizen*.”

Our recently announced expansion in circulation and coverage is a result of that kind of community ownership and interest. We grew not because of marketing or by upping mass, random distribution, but because each week more and more people chose to pick up a paper to read what we put together. In that regard, we are just another case for the idea that as a medium newspapers are still quite popular. Technology and business models may change, but the secret to success has not altered all that much in the industry’s 500-or-so-year history: A sense of place, a clear voice and a good read with news of the day that matters to people.

Thank you for reading our newspaper and making it your own.

THE CARRBORO  
CITIZEN

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Robert Dickson, Publisher  
Kirk Ross, Editor  
Taylor Sisk, Contributing Editor  
Liz Holm, Art Director  
Susan Dickson, Staff Writer  
Margot Carmichael Lester,  
Rich Fowler, Contributing Writers  
Ava Barlow, Photographer  
Editorial Interns: Jasmina Nogo

ADVERTISING

Marty Cassidy,  
Advertising Director  
marty@carrborocitizen.com

OPERATIONS

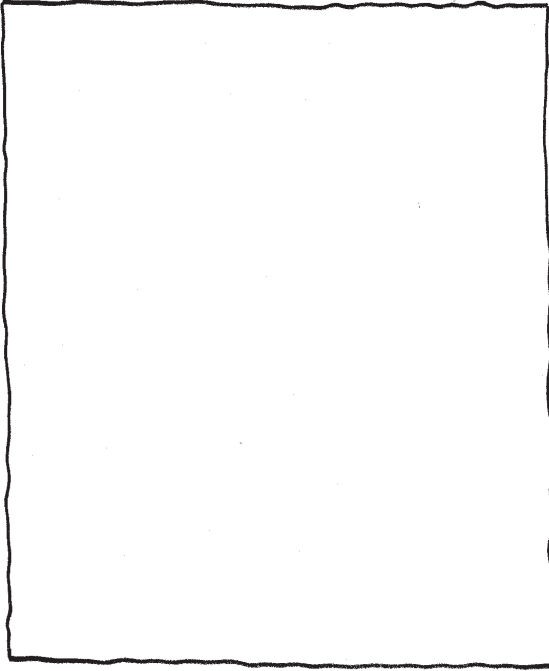
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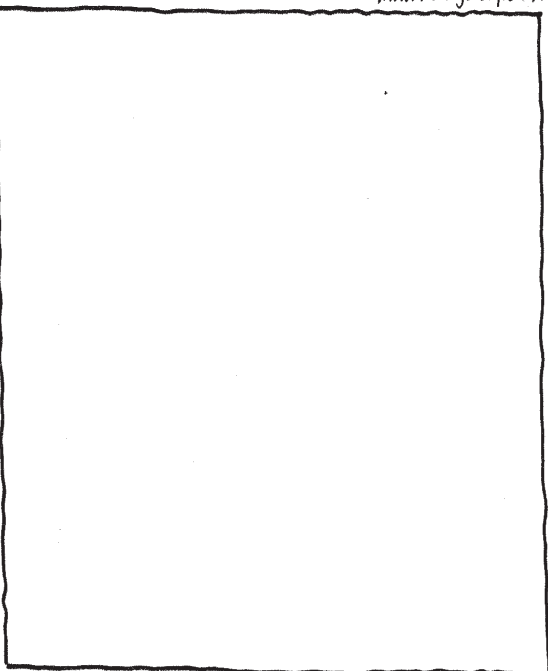
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For real mental health reform,  
listen to the consumers

VICKI SMITH

One media exposé after another has highlighted the flawed implementation of North Carolina’s much ballyhooed 2001 effort at mental health reform. These exposés have given many state officials heartburn as they picked up their morning papers or watched the evening news.

The media’s descriptions of the mental health/developmental disabilities/substance abuse (MH/DD/SA) service delivery system grabbed the attention of the general public and politicians alike. The plight of individuals with disabilities has become part of discussions in living rooms across the state. The media coverage has helped elevate the failures of the reform effort to such a degree that politicians were challenged to address it in their campaigns – and promises were made.

Now it is time to deliver on those promises. But to really fix mental health reform, it will take more than promises. It will take commitment. It will take political will. It will take listening to the voices of consumers.

Every one of the players – Gov. Perdue, Health and Human Services Secretary Cansler, the state Legislature, local management entities (LMEs), provider agencies and workers – must agree to put their special interests aside. They must agree to focus on the special but often ignored needs of the consumers of those services - people with mental illness, developmental disabilities including brain injury and/or addictive disorders.

At every step along the service continuum - from state-operated facilities to community services and from the state to the LMEs to providers – there have been significant failures.

The lack of appropriate governance has resulted in little or no accountability with serious consequences. One of the motivations for reform was to clarify which government body would ultimately be responsible for the welfare of the MH/DD/SA populations. Unfortunately, there is more confusion today than before. There must be greater oversight by the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services and it must be given the authority to act before systems fail. Expectations must be clearly articulated down the line. The state cannot abdicate its responsibility for the welfare of this specific group of its citizens.

The lack of adequate funding - especially within communities - is another major failure. And there is a direct relationship between funding and a third critical failure: the lack of a qualified workforce. Poor staffing results in poor services.

But perhaps the biggest malfunction of reform has been the failure of those in charge to listen to the individuals they are intended to serve. The reform has given lip service to the role of consumers in directing their services both at the individual level and across the system. This may sound like an accusation, but it is something our office has consistently heard - consumers do not feel listened to or included.

The Consumer and Family Advisory Councils (CFAC) were created to advise the LMEs but were given no meaningful role in shaping the services to be provided or in holding the LMEs accountable. There is no mechanism for individual CFACs to truly evaluate their LME and report concerns to the division or the Legislature.

The Legislative Oversight Committee has brought in one LME after another to report on its progress. But where was the presentation from those CFACs? Where was the consumer voice at the then Gov.-Elect Perdue’s Mental Health Transition meeting? LME directors were there, as were provider groups, psychiatrists, social workers, some family groups and others, such as Disability Rights North Carolina. But where was the deliberate involvement of the very people needing the services? Where were the consumers on the Department of Health and Human Services Involuntary Commitment Workgroup?

Why not talk to individuals and see how best to serve their needs? How have we gotten to the point that people with mental illness, people with developmental disabilities and those with addictive disorders are frequently missing at the table when we discuss the way out of this crisis?

The media has put a face on mental health reform. Now we must give it a voice – and the loudest voice must be the people to be served. That is the real change Gov. Perdue should commit to.

Vicki Smith is the executive director of Disability Rights North Carolina

A hospital visit amid troubling news

CHRIS FITZSIMON

Gov. Beverly Perdue has generally received good reviews for her first two weeks in office and deserves them, particularly for her executive orders on transportation and transparency, staying on top of the state’s budget woes and making a number of public appearances that reinforce her commitment to be an available, hands-on governor.

Perdue also dropped in on troubled Cherry Hospital in Goldsboro Friday, part of her campaign pledge to make unannounced visits to state institutions as one way to increase accountability in the state mental health system.

But other news from the mental health front was a troubling reminder of the extent of the problems Perdue faces and how much credibility state officials have lost with the communities they’re supposed to serve.

The *News & Observer* reported Saturday that Cherry Hospital officials did not submit a report about the death of a patient in October to a medical examiner, as the state law required them to do. The law also mandates that the body cannot be moved without permission from a pathologist.

The patient, Kenneth Gore, was buried by the time the report finally made it to the state medical examiner’s office in Chapel Hill earlier this month, making an investigation of his death much harder to conduct.

Legislators and advocates were outraged by the latest problem at the hospital. Federal funding is still suspended because of patient care and unsafe conditions. The *News & Observer* has reported that hospital employees have falsified medical records to hide their culpability in patient deaths.

New Secretary of Health and Human Services Lanier Cansler promises to address the problems at the hospital, but those promises have been made before. And a decision last week by mental health officials in the department Cansler now runs about the mental health mess in northeastern North Carolina doesn’t help his credibility any.

The Albemarle local management entity (LME) is supposed to oversee services in 10 counties in the region, but was plagued by mismanagement and budget problems that led to the dismissal of director Charles Franklin. Eighty employees of the LME are being laid off, providers in the area haven’t been paid since September and many patients can’t access the services they need.

State officials finally stepped in and mental health director Leza Wainwright announced that Tom McDevitt, the

former head of the Smoky Mountain Center LME in western North Carolina, would assume the leadership of the troubled Albemarle agency.

McDevitt resigned from the center in September after the *Smoky Mountain News* reported that McDevitt was paying himself two salaries totaling more than \$200,000 a year, employing his daughter and conducting real estate deals with his wife’s company, along with other questionable conduct.

That seemed to make him an odd choice to take over the Albemarle agency that was sputtering because of problems with its director, but Wainwright persisted, telling local officials that the problems with McDevitt at Smoky Mountain were exaggerated and he simply was “not a good fit” for that LME.

That understandably made folks in northeastern North Carolina wonder then why he’d be a good fit to help run their agency. Wainwright announced Friday that she had changed her mind, that McDevitt would not run the Albemarle LME after all.

She told the Elizabeth City *Daily Advance* that it would be difficult for McDevitt with the “shadow that had been cast” by what happened at Smoky Mountain. That would be the same shadow that existed before she announced McDevitt’s appointment.

Folks in northeastern North Carolina must be wondering what’s going on in Raleigh. It seems like the last thing you would do to a community that was suffering because of mismanagement is to hire someone who resigned from his last job under an ethical cloud for poor judgment as a manager of a similar agency.

At least Wainwright finally figured it out, but the whole episode doesn’t help public confidence in the mental health system that the public hasn’t had much confidence in for a while.

If case that wasn’t enough, Hyde County Sheriff David Mason told the *Daily Advance* on Friday that from his perspective the state mental health system is “a total failure ... and terrible is not even a word to describe it.”

There is no reason to doubt Gov. Perdue’s sincerity about her commitment to finally address the problems with the troubled system that is supposed to care for people with a mental illness, developmental disability or addiction.

But the last few days are a powerful reminder that she has her work cut out for her.

Chris Fitzimon is the director of NC Policy Watch.

LETTERS

Cost a concern

Despite extensive coverage about the county’s “budget concerns,” I saw nothing about the elephant in the room – the county’s planned waste transfer station. This industrial facility will be sited in a rural area – off the grid – with no water, sewer or highway access. So even in this early planning stage, the project is saddled with inflated construction costs, over-engineered features and excessive operating costs. As our population grows north toward Effland, these already inflated costs are certain to rise.

Then there are the traffic and safety issues, and the pure impracticality of siting the facility far away from where the trash will ever be generated. Siting in southwest Orange County is certain to cause irreparable harm to the local farms and businesses, homes, wildlife and groundwater.

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Leading local vendors, who can save us millions of dollars, are lining up to offer services on a short- or long-term basis. They already handle half of the county’s waste collection - and have a track record of quality service, using state-of-the-art equipment at competitive prices. They have fully functioning transfer stations and landfills with plenty of capacity. They are ready and waiting to compete for our business. It’s a win-win-win! So in the light of unprecedented economic pressure and concerns about the budget, we have an immediate opportunity to save millions of taxpayer dollars.

We can avoid the distraction of an unnecessary “interim” waste transfer station project and focus our attention on sustainable solutions for the long term - such as waste to energy.

The commissioners won’t convince us that they are serious about budgets until they address the elephant in the room. Halt the plan to site an overpriced waste transfer station in the rural county and pursue vendor solutions along with other sustainable and fiscally responsible alternatives - for the short and long term.

BONNIE HAUSER  
Hillsborough

LETTERS POLICY

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Letters to the editor  
Box 248  
Carrboro, North  
Carolina 27510

EMAIL: editor@  
carrborocitizen.com

FAX: 919-942-2195