

Happy, healthy, whole

Health care gets mixed marks in 2023



BY JESSICA WAKEMAN

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It might seem that only one story dominated the local wellness landscape in 2023: the frustration some residents' have with Mission Hospital and its for-profit owner HCA Healthcare. But a closer look will show that the community faced other successes and struggles with public health.

For example, Buncombe County and the City of Asheville put major resources toward addressing substance use, including the rise of fentanyl and xylazine in the street drug supply. The county debuted a co-responder unit, composed of a Buncombe County sheriff's officer and a trained mental health counselor, to respond to certain calls. The Mountain Area Health Education Center coordinated with Mission Hospital to initiate medication-assisted treatment for people with substance use disorders upon leaving the emergency room in an effort to address the illness.

But not all impacts to our local health care landscape originated in our county. Due to a change in North Carolina state law, beginning July 1 women can no longer terminate a pregnancy after 12 weeks of gestation, with few exceptions. And this year also saw North Carolina expand Medicare eligibility, which will allow thousands of more people locally to obtain health insurance.

Xpress heard from residents from all walks of life — some in health care, many not — about their thoughts on health and wellness in the region in 2023.

Looking back on 2023, do you think Buncombe County and Asheville are on the right path in how they address substance abuse in our community? Why or why not?

“There seems to have been some improvements on that front with more direct, proactive involvement from our first responders. It would be wonderful to see those programs that help people struggling with substance abuse continue to grow in size and scope of services. Treatment, employment and shelter/housing seem to really have a positive impact for the folks that are ready to receive help.”

— **Billy Doubraski**,
East West Asheville Neighborhood Association board member

“I believe that Buncombe County has made a start in the treatment of substance use, but I also feel that the stigma of addiction remains so great in this area that the community at large makes it very difficult to put the treatment needed where it is needed and when it is needed. Focusing on reducing stigma may improve outcomes in substance use treatment.”

— **Sherrie Pace**,
licensed social worker and addictions specialist

“Our local governments are fully aware of the challenges presented by substance abuse. There is a mutual commitment to meet this problem head-on, a dedication of resources and a sense of collaboration and shared vision. We didn't get here overnight,

nor will we overcome this menace in short order. Our focus remains on the disease rather than the symptoms, and I believe this is at the forefront of our local leaders' minds.”

— **Brad Branham**,
city attorney, City of Asheville

“More needs to be done to help with mental health and substance abuse as we continue to see many overdoses in our community. Initiatives like the medication-assisted treatment program are a path forward.”

— **Karis Roberts**,
executive director, Asheville Brewers Alliance

“My answer is controversial at this point. With all the junk in drugs these days — causing all sorts of problems, including overdoses and psychosis — I believe getting ‘illicit’ drugs from my doctor and pharmacy would at least give me a measured dosage of what I want to ingest, and my doctor would also be working with me directly, maybe more regularly. Major change of mindset needed for this one.”

— **Michael Harney**,
local educator

“Fentanyl use has been incredibly difficult to plan around in child welfare, given the safety considerations and the higher rates of death associated with its use. I think community paramedics have been a bright spot providing education, support and resources to those that are substance affected and unhoused. I also think the more we can use peer support

specialists, the greater chance we have to impact change.”

— **Mick McGuire**,
program coordinator, Buncombe County Social Services

How, if at all, have the state legislature's restrictions on abortion impacted your friends' and family's reproductive or family planning decisions?

“It is truly wild to me that any government entity has the desire or power to hold an individual's bodily autonomy hostage. North Carolina's Senate Bill 20 is detrimental to the livelihood of many and directly impacts anyone who deserves the right to make their own choices about their present-day experiences and their future, myself included.”

— **Ashanti Ternoir**,
community member and service provider

“Limiting and criminalizing access to this vital health care is a threat to the lives of those who can become pregnant. I think it is important for us to educate ourselves and take care of one another in community to ensure everyone continues to be able to get the health care they need, regardless of the unjust laws that are being passed to control our bodies.”

— **Grace Barron-Martinez**,
activist and Realtor

“Limiting access to full-spectrum reproductive care made it more complicated, delayed and expensive to access health care. Our neighbors are weighing the costs of family planning — housing, transportation and child care — with the reality that they may need to travel to receive medically necessary care. People who can afford it are making difficult and costly decisions to take off work, arrange child care and travel to other states to have



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