



Community Partner Collaborations

CHHS partners with DrugFree WilCo in Wilson County to address the opioid epidemic

In addition to the many collaborations and partnerships MTSU Center for Health and Human Services has fostered on campus, the center very much values its community partners. In 2020, CHHS formed a research partnership with DrugFree WilCo to address the opioid epidemic in rural Wilson County communities as part of a \$200,000 planning grant CHHS applied for and received from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), an agency of the U.S. Department



of Health and Human Services. Working closely with DrugFree WilCo's leadership team, with program coordinator Michael Ayalon, and with project assistant Chipper Smith,

the community recently completed a needs assessment and gap analysis with a goal of submitting a grant application this spring to HRSA for up to \$1.0 million, which will fund needed services and resources identified through the assessment process. The CHHS team and DrugFree WilCo also engaged MTSU's Data Science Institute, led by Charles Apigian and Ryan Otter, and Kahler Stone

of the Department of Health and Human Performance to assist with project activities.

Who is DrugFree WilCo?

DrugFree WilCo started in May 2018 through Wilson County Mayor Randall Hutto's office. Community leaders were assembled to discuss an incident in which a local resident, Lisa Tapley, lost her son Thomas after an opioid overdose.

Tapley tried to find local assistance for her son's treatment after a work injury to his back, but they were traveling to neighboring states because they were not aware of the resources available in Wilson County. Thomas' story ended with street pills that were laced with fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid that is 80–100 times more powerful than morphine. Leaders in Wilson County decided to take action immediately.

A board of directors was assembled, and a mission statement was developed for the new coalition. Twelve community sectors participated in the initial meeting, including a youth component, parents, media, school administrators, youth-serving organizations,

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law enforcement, religious organizations, health care professionals, local politicians, civic groups, and the business community.

DrugFree WilCo meets monthly and has a coalition of up to 180 volunteers. They are dedicated to uniting the community of Wilson County with the mission to prevent and reduce drug misuse and addiction among youth and adults, and to provide education, communication, and awareness of resources.

In December 2020 and January 2021, focus groups were held with various leaders in Wilson County.

“It was fascinating to capture all of this qualitative data from our leaders on the problems we are facing as a community,” said Ayalon, coordinator of the Wilson County Rural Communities Opioid Response Program. “Some of the solutions they came

up with include a diversion center [called the PIC Center, Preventing Incarcerations in Communities], a jail-based reentry transition specialist, education in businesses and youth organizations, a real-time [overdose] map for Wilson County, a Naloxone distribution program, and a plan for transportation to treatment appointments. We’re going to make a difference in Wilson County, and it’s because the entire community came together to brainstorm solutions and take a different approach than what we are accustomed to. We have an incredible team at DrugFree WilCo, and this new partnership with MTSU has opened doors for us that we couldn’t do on our own.”

For more information on DrugFree WilCo, visit its website at drugfreewilco.org. CHHS and DrugFree WilCo will continue to post project and other organizational updates on their websites and on social media at [facebook.com/drugfreewilco](https://www.facebook.com/drugfreewilco).

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“It was quickly evident at the onset of the pandemic that agricultural systems, families, and workforce development programs—key focus areas for USDA and our partners—would be greatly impacted by the changes facing our society,” Chitnis said. “USDA-NIFA is uniquely positioned to fund rapid response research, outreach, and education efforts, while continuing to support our base research, education, Extension, and 4-H youth development programs that respond daily to producer and consumer needs, large and small, across the nation.”

For more information on “STEMsational Ag: The Virtual Farm” please contact Jill Thomas, project coordinator, at jill.thomas@mtsu.edu.

Information concerning the grant can be found on the USDA website at [nifa.usda.gov/press-release/usda-nifa-invests-over-105-million-support-educators-4-h-and-others-workforce-training](https://www.nifa.usda.gov/press-release/usda-nifa-invests-over-105-million-support-educators-4-h-and-others-workforce-training). CHHS will continue to post updates on its website.

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