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Guest column: Community mental health clinics can help solve our crisis. Here's how.

BY CASEY GUIDRY AND ALICE RIENER

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A sign at the shuttered ferry landing encourages mental health and addiction help in Pointe a la Hache on Nov. 7, 2023.

STAFF PHOTO BY SOPHIA GERMER

Louisiana is facing a mental health crisis.

Nearly 715,000 adults in our state live with a mental health condition, and 179,000 of them experience serious mental illness. An estimated 44,000 teens between 12 and 17 are struggling with depression. Approximately 3.4 million Louisianans live in areas without enough mental health professionals to meet the growing demand.

It's clear that we need real solutions. One of the most promising answers? Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics.

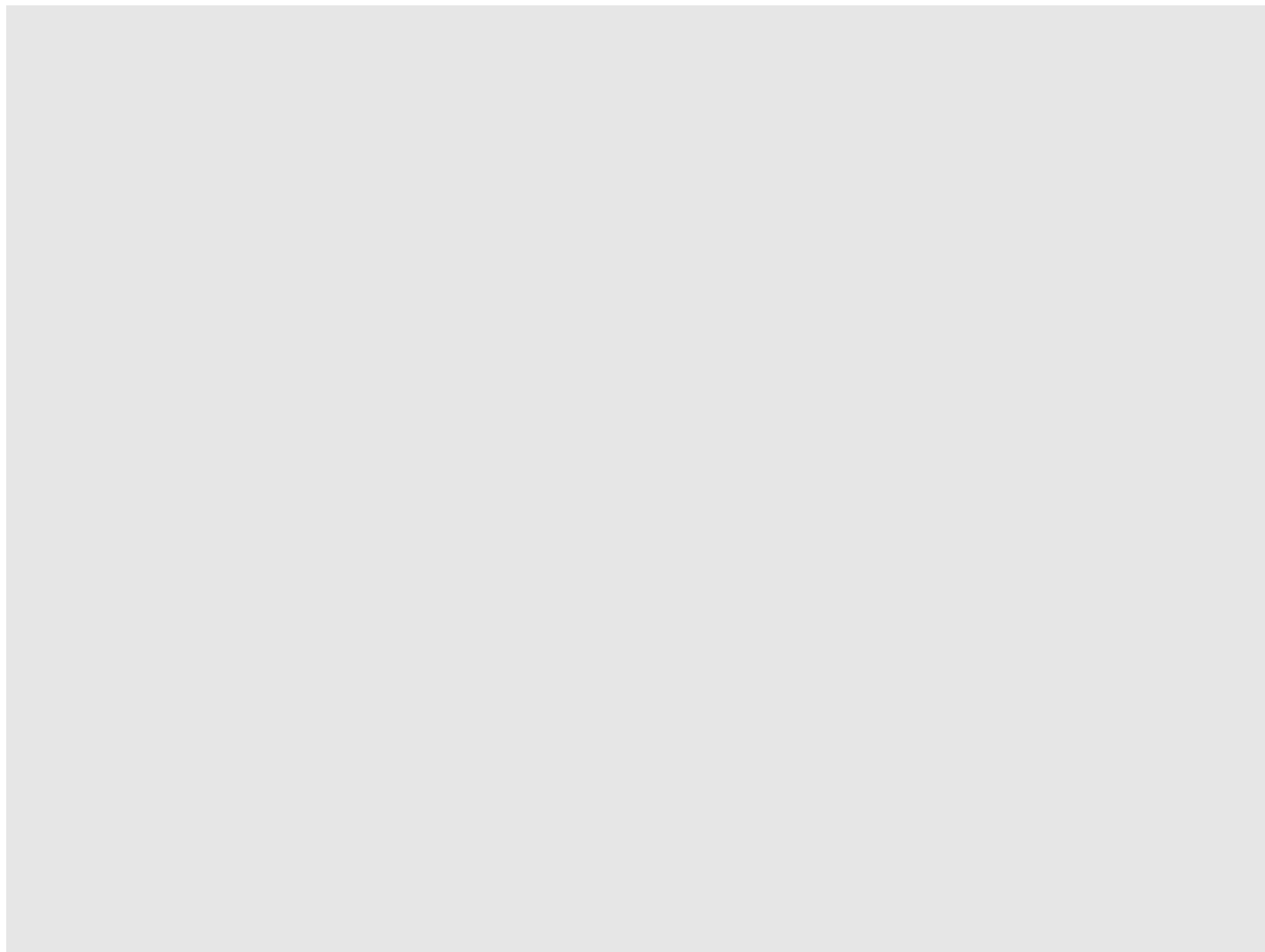
CCBHCs, established by Congress in 2014, are designed to provide a wide range of mental health and substance use services. At CrescentCare in New Orleans and Start Community Health Center in Houma, we operate two of Louisiana's six CCBHCs, offering care to everyone in our community — no matter their diagnosis, insurance status or ability to pay. Grant funding has allowed us to expand our teams, partner with local organizations and provide 24/7 crisis response.

The impact of CCBHCs is undeniable. Michael came to us after losing his job due to substance misuse. For years, he had tried to numb the pain of unaddressed trauma. At CrescentCare, he began not only substance use treatment but also the deep work of addressing the trauma driving his addiction.

Today, Michael is in recovery and flourishing. He has returned to full-time work, built a strong support network in the local recovery community and is creating a future full of possibility.

At Start Corporation, another Louisiana CCBHC, Elizabeth was a young pregnant woman who struggled with trauma, behavioral health issues and substance use. Through Start's coordinated care model, she was connected to substance use programs, case management and parent education services. She secured stable housing and gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Today, both Elizabeth and her son are thriving.

These stories are why we do this work. But without sustainable funding, we risk leaving more people behind. Thousands of Louisianans still lack access to this kind of care. And the grant funding we rely on isn't a permanent solution.



Casey Guidry

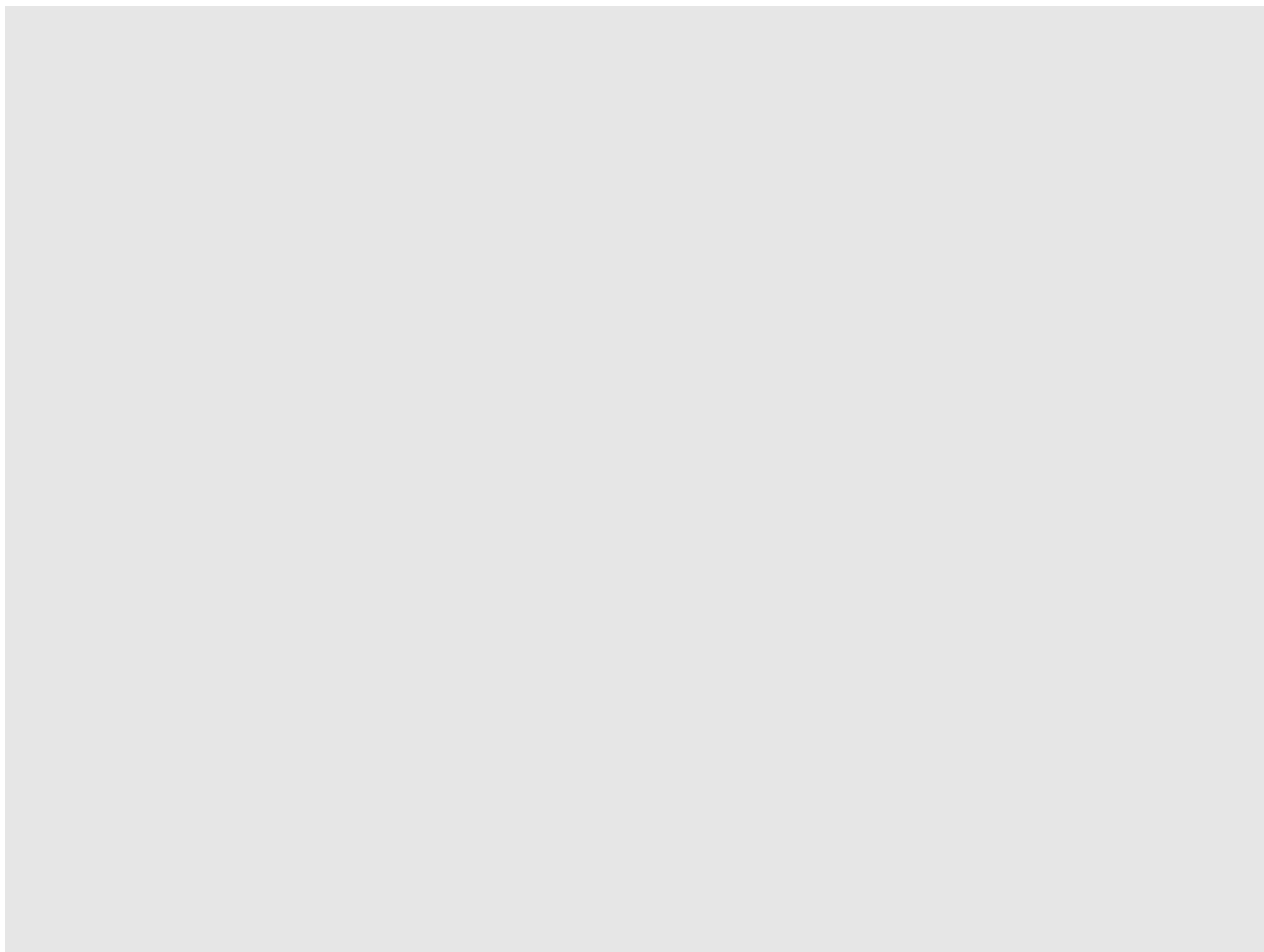
Provided photo

There are two main ways CCBHCs are funded across the country. In 20 states, clinics access a flexible Medicaid payment rate that reimburses them for the full costs of care. This system enables expanded access to care and provides stable, long-term funding. For example, some clinics in rural areas have used these funds to purchase mobile health units, bringing care directly to people who might otherwise go without.

Louisiana isn't there yet. Right now, our CCBHCs depend on federal grants that only last a few years at a time and don't fully cover the cost of care. This uncertainty makes it hard to plan ahead or launch critical new programs.

But we are making progress. The state recently received a \$1 million federal planning grant that could help us access this flexible payment rate in the future. That is great news, but that process could take years.

Thankfully, Congress has a chance to fix this. Bipartisan legislation introduced last Congress — the Ensuring Excellence in Mental Health Act — would give Louisiana's CCBHCs access to the same stable funding as those in other states. It would also help more clinics in Louisiana achieve CCBHC status, making it easier for them to meet the growing demand for care. We encourage our congressional delegation to support similar legislation in this new Congress.



Alice Riener

Provided photo

We also encourage our representatives in Washington to resist drastic cuts to Medicaid, which, together with the Children's Health Insurance Program, covers over 1.6 million people in Louisiana. Medicaid is the

largest funder of substance use and mental health services. Significant cuts to the program jeopardize the great work of CCBHCs and other community health centers.

CCBHCs have proved their value. They deliver high-quality, accessible care, often to people who have nowhere else to turn. Expanding this model is not just a policy decision; it's a lifeline for thousands of Louisianans.

It's time for our congressional delegation to take action. Ensuring reintroduction and passage of the Ensuring Excellence Act this year will guarantee that CCBHCs can keep changing lives — one person, one family, and one community at a time.

Let's give Louisiana the same chance as other states to build a future where everyone has access to the care they need. Our communities deserve nothing less.

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