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Former drug czar promotes treatment at New Life expansion event

By Josh Arntz



Retired four-star Gen. Barry McCaffrey, who is the former U.S. drug czar and is an analyst for NBC; Dr. Barry Karlin, CRC chairman and CEO; and Joe Pritchard, CRC Health Group vice president who oversees New Life Lodge, pose in front of New Life Lodge and its pond. (Josh Arntz/The Herald)

A retired four-star general was in Dickson County on Friday to continue a war on drugs.

However, the “war” that retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey is promoting isn’t the Reagan-style, militant focus of the mid-80s. McCaffrey, after all, was the nation’s drug czar under Bill Clinton in the late 90s. His focus, as a cabinet member under Clinton and now as part of BR McCaffrey Associates LLC, has been on treatment of the drug users.

"If you believe that this is the biggest public health challenge facing this country or the biggest challenge facing our justice system or the problem that is the most detrimental to our work force, then treating it only makes sense," said McCaffrey, who is also a West Point professor and a national security and terrorism analyst for NBC News.

On Friday, McCaffrey was joined by Rick Chandler, Dickson public safety director and chief of police, and other drug prevention and treatment officials at New Life Lodge, an alcohol and drug treatment center located in Burns. A 25th anniversary celebration and a groundbreaking for a \$4 million facility expansion were held.

The facility currently houses 140 beds for its patients, 40 of which are for adolescents. The expansion will

increase capacity to 80 adolescent beds with a new dorm, along with a new school, administration building with a dining hall and recreation area. Some of those at New Life are Dickson County residents. Though rural, the county is not immune to drug activity and substance abuse.

Over the past five months, a new methamphetamine-cooking method has been reported in the county, a psychedelic mushrooms bust happened in Burns and a 100-plant marijuana grow house was found by law enforcement.

"I think it's (the extent of drug use in the county) actually spiking somewhat, due to the fact that more and more people are moving into the county," said Rick Chandler, Dickson public safety director/chief of police. "This area is usually a few years behind other areas, but the meth use is one of the things that's really starting to spike in our area."

Dr. Barry Karlin, chairman and CEO of CRC Health Group, which operates New Life Lodge, was also a speaker at the event. McCaffrey has been elected to the CRC board of directors.

Chandler, Karlin and McCaffrey testified to the need for drug and alcohol treatment programs, while also addressing the tripling use of prescription opiates and painkillers, like OxyContin, Vicodin, Percocet and Percodan, and the lack of available drug abuse treatment for Tennesseans.

"Enforcement is not the only way to do it (drug prevention)," Chandler said. "You're going to have to go to other aspects of it, and you sometimes forget about that. You just want to lock them up and throw away the key, and you don't solve the problem."

Karlin, citing information from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, said about 485,000 Tennesseans need drug treatment but don't receive it, compared to 23.9 million people nationwide.

"Tennessee is in the top 20 percent of states in this country in terms of the treatment gap," Karlin said. "This state has done a tremendous job of trying to make funds available through Medicaid and other programs to support people who can't otherwise afford treatment.

"But, there's no way they can keep up with it... and that's (a lack of funding) why you have this huge treatment gap," he added.

McCaffrey pointed to the poor pain management techniques practiced by physicians and the availability of prescription opiates and painkillers as the reason for the incredible increase in drug abuse.

"If you use them (prescription opiates) and you take off the protective coating for time release, it's the most intense heroin experience imaginable, and it's cheap and it's available," said McCaffrey. "You can steal it out of your mom's medicine cabinet, or go to seven doctors in seven different communities, or crooks, like crooked pharmacies who are peddling thousands of bottles of this drug."

A combination of medications and behavioral therapy, along with increased funding and research by pharmaceutical companies is leading to better treatment, McCaffrey said. Researchers are exploring experimental drug vaccinations to help break cocaine addiction.

According to Karlin, 68 percent of those who are treated at New Life Lodge remain clean and sober one year after their stay. The center has treated 12,500 people over its 25 years.

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