

## Appalachian Center of Hope

### Appalachian Center of Hope hailed as place of new life

- SPorter
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State and local officials and community members gathered at the Appalachian Center of Hope Friday for a ribbon cutting.

Stephanie Porter-Nichols/Smyth County News & Messenger

As Virginia's Attorney General praised Smyth County's vision and its movement toward light and hope with the opening of the Appalachian Center for Hope, he remembered the depth of darkness that led to Friday's celebration.

“It was like a bomb went off in Southwest Virginia,” declared Attorney General Jason Miyares as he described how the opioid epidemic began in this region.

He told how pharmaceutical manufacturers targeted this region for oxycontin’s distribution and told physicians that it wasn’t addictive. Miyares said, “We saw the national epidemic start here.”

The impact, he said, was devastating.

Miyares spoke of his work as Attorney General to combat substance abuse and taking those pharmaceutical companies to court, where he won “some of the largest verdicts in Virginia.”

The journey that began in darkness will end in light, Miyares declared. He reminded the gathering, “Asking for help is one of the most beautiful and noble things” a person can do.

The Attorney General was just one of a significant number of state and local officials and community leaders present to celebrate the soon-to-open Appalachian Center for Hope, which is on the Southwestern Virginia Mental Health Institute campus in Marion.

Known as the Rehab Building, the structure opened in 1939 as a tuberculosis ward. Slated for demolition, the state legislature ultimately deeded the property to Smyth County for use as the Appalachian Center for Hope.

Miyares said the center represents second chances.

The Attorney General quoted a portion of Deuteronomy 30:19 that says “...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life....”

Miyares also spoke about the establishment of the Opioid Abatement Authority, which takes the money from the pharmaceutical lawsuit verdicts and awards grants to organizations addressing substance abuse.

Sen. Todd Pillion, of Washington County, is the OAA chair.

He called the Appalachian Center for Hope a vital tool in addressing a problem that has plagued this region for decades. The OAA, he said, has awarded more than \$2.3 million to the center.

Pillion noted that in-patient treatment, which the center will provide, shows far greater long-term success for recovery. He also celebrated the center’s plans to help patients through workforce development, peer recovery, and even recovery housing.

Though Pillion no longer represents Smyth County, the state senator said, “I will always be your ally. There are no district lines in Southwest Virginia.”

Pillion recalled taking a tour of the then abandoned Rehab Building and seeing the cobwebs and asbestos and disrepair and thinking, “John is very ambitious.”

He was referring to John Graham, a pastor, the county’s clerk of court, and the individual who from its outset has headed the work to make the center a reality.

Friday, Graham celebrated the many people who joined him in the endeavor.

Opening the ceremony, his words were: “Wow! What a joy to be here today, to see this room full.”

He encouraged the people present to look at one another. Graham then quoted Hellen Keller, saying, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

### **A Vision’s Birth**

The idea for the center was envisioned by a consortium of leaders brought together to help assess Smyth County’s health needs when Mountain States Health Alliance and Wellmont were preparing to merge and form Ballad Health. In 2019, Graham explained that once they assessed the needs and saw how serious many of them were, the group members couldn’t walk away once their report was filed. They had to act.

One of the most telling pieces of hard data, Graham said, was the rate of babies born addicted to drugs because of their mothers’ addiction was the second highest in Virginia, six to seven times the state average.

They saw drug treatment as one of their highest priorities, especially the need for a residential treatment center in the region where none existed at the time.

Graham recalled Dennis Carter, then Smyth’s school superintendent and now a Emory & Henry vice president, saying, “Folks, we can’t just learn this information and move on.”

He also pointed to Sheriff Chip Shuler, who has served with the group from its outset, saying, “We’re not going to arrest our way out of this” crisis.

Graham celebrated Joey Carrico, Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society’s director, for providing the group’s “sense of urgency” by reminding them, “You realize people are dying because we don’t have our doors open.”

His list also included Dale Clark, Smyth County Community Hospital’s CEO, and his predecessor James Tyler, as well as Sandy Bryant, the head of Mount Rogers Community Services.

Graham, who had welcomed his first granddaughter days earlier, compared Friday’s celebration to that of new life.

## **Home for New Life or Horror Film?**

As the group behind the center moved forward, the Rehab Building came to their attention. They loved all the windows. Marion architect Bill Humber was eager to restore the feel of the building's original windows and take advantage of the natural light and view of the region's natural beauty. He also saw many aspects to preserve such as the building's genuine terrazzo floors while also working to make the structure less institutional.

Yet early on, everyone recognized the challenges.

On a tour of the structure with its dust, cobwebs, and debris, U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine teasingly suggested they could pay for the center by first filming a horror movie there.

Graham noted the initial renovation cost was put at \$1.2 million. The final total came in at \$6.3 million.

Envisicon Construction served as project contractor.

## **Dumpster Diving**

In recognition of the potential for new life, Graham said some members of the Appalachian Center of Hope's team weren't above dumpster diving.

In recent months, he explained that it was recognized that the building's 86-year-old roof needed to be replaced. The old slate tiles ended up in a dumpster.

Team members got them out.

Marion artist Rachel Gibson painted the center's logo on each one, while Smyth County artist Tina Surber made coasters. The tiles and coasters were awarded to many of the benefactors and supporters of the center.

## **Beyond Smyth**

Del. Israel O'Quinn also supported the center from the outset.

Friday, O'Quinn thought the project supporters possessed considerable "audacity." However, he said he and the other members of the legislative delegation knew that what's good for Smyth is also good for Wythe, Washington and other counties in the region.

"Today," O'Quinn said, "that bold plan becomes reality."

The center will be a safe environment allowing for permanent change. For that, O'Quinn said, the region will be a better place.

Lynda Helton, the Smyth County Community Foundation executive director, agreed.

Celebrating the foundation's partnership with the center, Helton said it will help build a more hopeful future for Smyth County and Southwest Virginia.

She did celebrate Smyth, saying, "This is definitely a community that cares."

Graham noted that the foundation's early \$3 million pledge allowed the group to move forward with confidence.

### **Akin to a Miracle**

As the center opens, Graham said the provision of therapy has been contracted out to Fairview Housing, the non-profit organization behind Bristol Lifestyle Recovery and Mended Women in Abingdon.

The center, Graham said, will operate as Marion Lifestyle Recovery at the Appalachian Center for Hope.

Bob Garrett, the head of Fairview Housing, said the organization is "extremely honored to be part of this project."

Years ago, Garrett said the nonprofit opened Manna House in Johnson City, Tennessee, to address addiction recovery. Then, he noted the substances abused were primarily alcohol and cocaine.

While there won't be preaching or attempts at faith conversion, Garrett said, "We can show them God's love. We've seen it work miracles time after time."

Now, he said, the center can offer low-intensity treatment and is being licensed for high-intensity care. Patients will be able to stay from 30 days to six to eight months.

Work is underway, Garrett said, to address transitional housing.

ACH will offer much more than addiction recovery. "People will get their lives back," Garrett said.

In his 50 years of this work, Garrett said he's seen nothing like this project, describing it as an extremely complicated endeavor. "To pull this off is really kind of a miracle," he said.

### **Inspiration Source**

Looking around the room, Graham said several of the people there were in recovery.

To them, he said, "Thank you for showing us it is possible. You are our inspiration. You are why we're doing this."

He again looked around the building, where the smell of fresh paint lingered, and reflected that it had been on the demolition list, thought to be at the end of its useful life. Now it has new life offering hope, Graham said.

He reminded those struggling with addiction, that even when they fall, they can find new life.

The center holds an occupancy permit for 30 people and operations are anticipated to begin soon.