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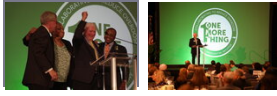
For Carswell, the fight against substance abuse is personal



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Burke County Commissioner Johnnie Carswell raises his hand as he stands with officials from the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners during his inauguration as the organization's president last Saturday in Raleigh.

COURTESY NCACC / FOR THE PAPER



Posted Saturday, September 2, 2023 12:05 am

By MARTY QUEEN
Senior Reporter, THE PAPER

The substance abuse and opioid epidemic is a subject near and dear to the heart of Burke County Commissioner Johnnie Carswell.

That's why he's making the dilemma the focus of his initiative as president of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC). Carswell, 76, was sworn in to the post Saturday night in Raleigh. He'll serve a one-year term.

Carswell and his wife Brenda lost their son Greg to an opioid overdose in 2013.

"Death has no boundaries when it comes to substance abuse," Carswell said. "It picks anybody. I don't know anybody who hasn't had someone in their family to have a problem with substance abuse. At Greg's funeral, my wife looked at me and said, 'If we could have done one more thing...' So that's my presidential initiative – if we can do one more thing.

"When you look at North Carolina, we've got 100 more counties. So, if Burke will do one more thing. If Alexander will do one more thing. If Catawba will do one more thing. I don't know what that one more thing is, and that's what we've got to decide as we move forward and we've got a good start now that the lawsuit is completed with the Sackler family and OxyContin. If we can do one more thing, maybe we can prevent parents from having to bury their children."

Carswell, who rose through the ranks in the NCACC from Second Vice President to First VP and then to President-Elect, said he hopes the organization's strong voice in state government will help him accomplish his goals.

He said the state of North Carolina has done a good job addressing the issue, especially where the funds from the Opioid lawsuit are concerned. Purdue Pharma and its owners, the Sacklers, paid \$6 billion last year to settle a lawsuit brought by several states. North Carolina is one of the states that agreed to the settlement and received funds.

North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein has said most of that money has been tagged for treatment programs.

Through the NCACC's connection to the National Association of Counties (NACO), Carswell hopes other states can model North Carolina's performance.

"North Carolina is at the forefront," Carswell said. "We've got a plan and people are emulating and copying our plan. So my initiative is going to work very closely with NACO. Instead of narrowing this down to North Carolina, we're going to take North Carolina's plan and let it flow all across the United States through NACO."

He said it isn't enough to treat the physical symptoms of overdose with drugs like naloxone (Narcan), which quickly counteracts the effect of opioids. Long-term treatment for addicted individuals is the only way out of the crisis, he said; Greg's downward spiral and eventual death convinced him of that.

"We tried everything that you could try. I am not a believer in 30-, 60-, 90-day rehabs. God bless them, but they don't work," he said.

"I was in Denver, Colorado, not too long ago, talking to some people out there. I asked what they were going to do with their lawsuit monies. (They said) 'Well, we're going to buy Narcan. I said, 'Great, what else are you going to do?' 'Well, we'll buy more Narcan.' I said, 'What are you going to do when you run out of Narcan? What's next on your agenda? They didn't have

anything. Some people don't really have a good plan. So what we'd like to do is educate them to the fact there are more things out here we can do."

In his inaugural speech, Carswell further outlined his plans.

"Over the next several months, we will establish a planning committee, coordinated with NACO, our National organization – to plan, organize and host a summit on reducing overdose," Carswell said. "As I mentioned, North Carolina and our counties are leaders in the country on opioid treatment efforts. So, next year we will host a summit bringing together county leaders from all across the country to shine a light on best practices."

Carswell said the Memorandum of Agreement from the North Carolina Department of Justice allocates 15% of the funds for state use, while the remaining 85% will go to the counties.

Carswell is part of the state's 5-5-5 Committee, comprising five county commissioners, five county managers, and five county attorneys. The committee's task is to collaborate with the DOJ and formulate a plan to maximize the effects of the settlement windfall.

He said the committee fought hard for the 15/85 split in funding. Carswell said he's confident individual counties can put the money to better use than the state. That's especially true for Burke County, he added.

"We've got great people here," Carswell said. "We've got a good medical team here with our folks at UNC (Health). BSAN (Burke Substance Abuse Network) is just absolutely fantastic people who work really hard. With (Public Health Director) Danny Scalise's help, being in charge of trying to do what we feel like our vision is for a rehab program. He and (Social Services Director) Korey Fisher-Wellman, we're really excited as for where we're going."

Carswell added he's excited about the opportunity to lead the NCACC, especially on the substance abuse issue.

"I'm extremely humbled to be in the position that I am now," said Carswell. "I'm going to step forward and work not just on my initiative. That's what my initiative will be. Next year, we'll go back to the General Assembly with our goals, and I think it will open some doors that I haven't been able to get through before. The NCACC is an avenue for us to make a difference.

"We want to encourage all the 100 counties to take advantage of all the programs the NCCAC has to offer. This will only help us here in Burke County. It will give us that opportunity to do things we haven't been able to do in the past."

Marty Queen is the senior reporter for The Paper. He may be reached at 828-445-8595 (tel:828-445-8595) or at marty@thepaper.media.



Johnnie Carswell

“ *Death has no boundaries when it comes to substance abuse. I don't know anybody who hasn't had someone in their family to have a problem with substance abuse.*”

BURKE COUNTY COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE CARSWELL

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