

## Program fosters mental health

Written by Allison Griffin  
May. 07

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**Former U.S. surgeon general Dr. David Satcher speaks at an Envision 2020 luncheon at the Capital City Club in Montgomery on Monday. 'If (mental health services) don't happen in early childhood, it's very difficult to catch up later,' he said. 'Those first three years are critical.' / Mickey Welsh/Advertiser**

Identifying and treating mental illness and promoting mental health care is complex, but one research group has developed a program that's been successful enough to earn funding from the National Institutes of Health.

And that program will soon be replicated in Alabama.

*Former U.S. surgeon general Dr. David Satcher speaks at an Envision 2020 luncheon at the Capital City Club in Montgomery on Monday. 'If (mental health services) don't happen in early childhood, it's very difficult to catch up later,' he said. 'Those first three years are critical.'*

That news was just one part of a keynote speech by Dr. David Satcher, the former U.S. surgeon general who is now the director of the Satcher Health Leadership Institute, established in 2008 at the Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta.

Satcher spoke to a lunch gathering of Montgomery-area elected officials, health administrators and community members at the Capital City Club. The speech was a part of a River Region mental health conference held on Monday.

Satcher's institute serves a population in Atlanta that is predominantly black and low-income, one that has difficulty finding health resources. The institute started an intervention program to reach out to parents and focus on early child development.

The program used child obesity and behavioral health as outcomes to measure whether the intervention worked. Researchers found that over time, parents changed, especially their incidence of depression. Satcher said depression is common in low-income communities, especially among black women.

In the intervention, the parents were supporting each other and had a network in place to receive positive feedback about their parenting. That led to an improvement in their overall mental health.

Part of the solution is utilizing a community's resources, Satcher said. "I think it's time for us to really look for the strengths of these communities and how we can nurture that strength."

His institute is partnering with the Atlanta public school system to engage parents and teachers to help identify children who need help. "If (mental health services) don't happen in early childhood, it's very difficult to catch up later," he said. "Those first three years are critical."

One local pediatrician agreed. Dr. Bob Beshear, who is with Physicians to Children and is a child health care advocate, found Satcher's remarks "insightful and inspiring."

“Mental health promotion begins (in) infancy,” he said.

Satcher gave a wide-ranging speech and touched on several issues, including the need to integrate mental health care with primary care. “What we have done is to develop teams, to have a psychiatrist or psychologist working with a series of primary care providers,” he said. “Together, they’re able to take care of more patients.”

That also increased the quality of care by ensuring earlier access to mental health services, Satcher said.

He also struck a hopeful tone. “The good news is that we can treat mental disorders and return people to productive lives 90 to 95 percent of the time.”

But stigma continues to be a huge barrier to a healthy community, he said. Churches can help, along with more open discussion of mental illness. “It’s time to treat mental disease the way we treat other disorders.”