



East TN Rural Health Consortium

NEWSLETTER

Issue 19 | Summer 2025



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A Brief Introduction of COURAGE: Combating Opioid Use in Rural Appalachia with Grace and Evidence

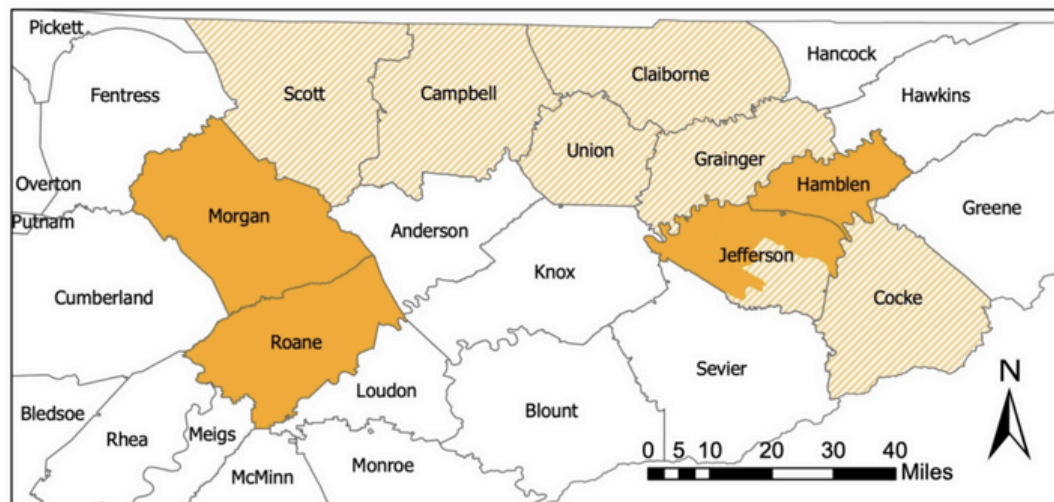
Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) is a critical public health crisis, with rural regions like East Tennessee experiencing disproportionate severity and impacts. Unique social, economic, and healthcare challenges within Appalachian communities have created persistent barriers to OUD prevention, treatment, and recovery.



Tackling this complex issue requires a multidisciplinary, community-centered approach to address critical areas of OUD prevention, stigma reduction, and workforce development. *COURAGE* addresses two overarching goals: (1) prevent opioid use disorder (OUD) with an emphasis on youth and the adults who care for them and (2) enhance OUD treatment and recovery by promoting integrated, interdisciplinary care.

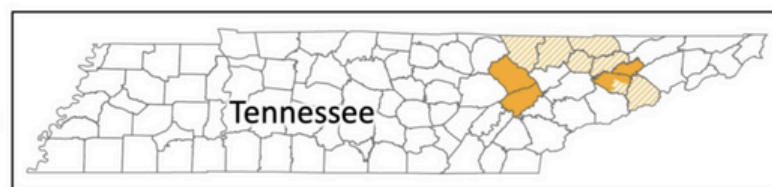
The COURAGE team includes members of the East Tennessee Rural Health Consortium: UT, ICARE-Union County, Live Free-Claiborne, Main Street Pharmacy of Newport, Bethany Church-Claiborne, and United Methodist Church of Newport, TN. Together, we serve rural East Tennessee – 6 entirely rural counties & 2 rural census tracts in Jefferson County.

This newsletter highlights key program outcomes, showcases

university-community partnerships, and outlines the evidence-based strategies COURAGE is using to address opioid use disorder. COURAGE is grounded in collaboration, compassion, and evidence to drive lasting change in rural East Tennessee through youth-focused prevention efforts, outreach initiatives, drug take-back initiative, and mentorship programs for faith leaders, pharmacists, and healthcare providers.



 Service Area
 Non-Service Area



By Caroline F. Ajilogba, PhD, MSc

Summary of Youth Hope

Maynardville youth of Union County have acquired hope through education. For the last three years, Youth HOPE (YH), a prevention program initiated and overseen by Dr. Meschke, has served to enhance youth knowledge and attitudes about substance use prevention through youth development strategies. Ultimately the youth promote healthy relationships and lifestyles by becoming the voice of advocacy in their communities. Youth HOPE is a collaboration between UTK, Paulette Elementary, and ICARE drug coalition. Through resources and support, youth are prepared to make informed decisions about addiction, particularly opioid use disorder. Some of the highlights of the program include:

- School-based training on life skills, community engagement, substance use knowledge including prevention, and advocacy
- Youth presentations promote their self-esteem, grow positive peer relationships and increase healthy habits
- Collaborations with healthcare providers, the mayor's office, University of Tennessee and the school board increase confidence and self-efficacy.

Youth HOPE serves an average of 50 youth, ages 10-11, annually. This 20-hour program is facilitated by graduate students from the University of Tennessee (at least 1 instructor per 4 students) across the school year.

Youth Hope curriculum

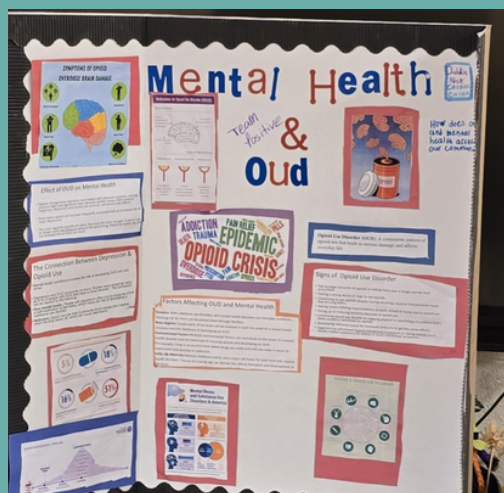
Since 2014, graduate students, led by Laurie L. Meschke, created and modified the YH curriculum guide.

Young people have the opportunity to practice new skills, gain knowledge of research and advocacy strategies, and receive guidance in developing and implementing change initiatives. The aim of Youth HOPE is to encourage youth in healthy lifestyles that will lead to change in the community especially as it relates to opioid use disorder (OUD).

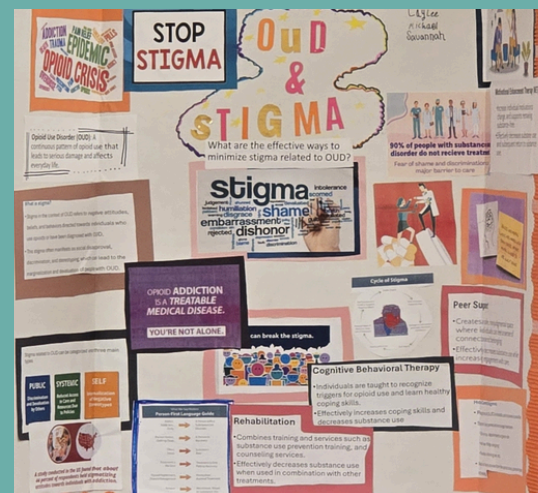
The Fall sessions support youth knowledge and skill development to conduct a community health assessment. Each youth team chooses a OUD-related health priority to assess, conducts research, and articulates their findings in poster presentations attended by family, youth, and community leaders.

The Spring sessions focus on the skills and knowledge to develop an advocacy product to impact the health issues that were assessed in the Fall. Advocacy products included letters to the mayor, billboards and flyers, and the creation of a short videos.

The YH training program emphasizes relationship building among the youth and facilitators, skill building, leadership, and community engagement. The 20-hour curriculum can be adjusted to occur weekly or bi-weekly.

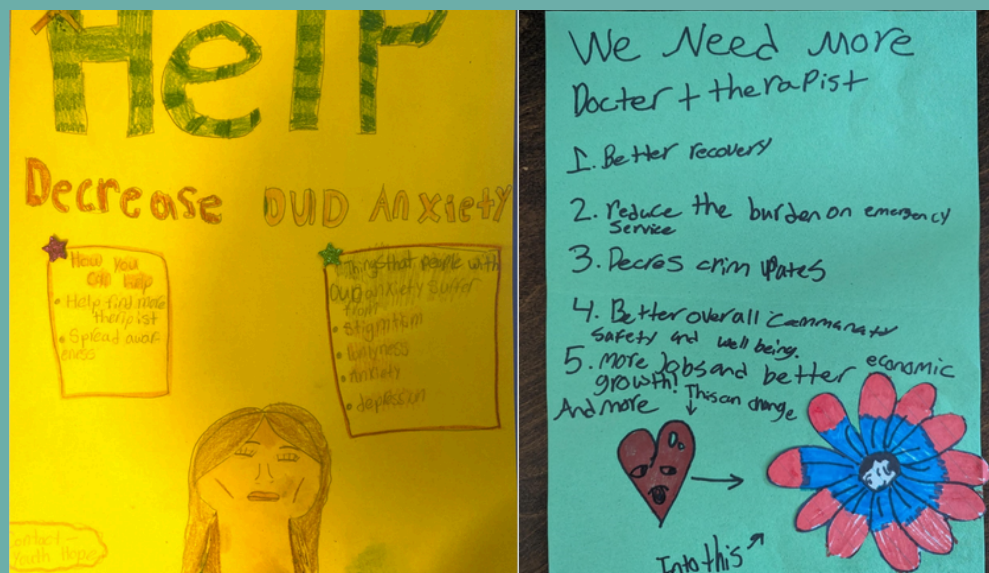


Poster on the impact of OUD on mental health

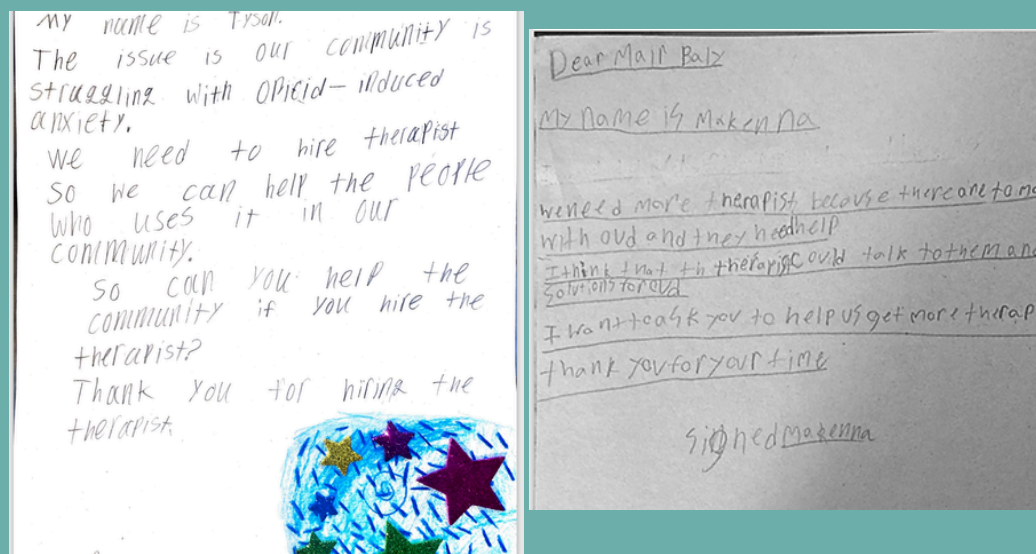


Poster on OUD and stigma

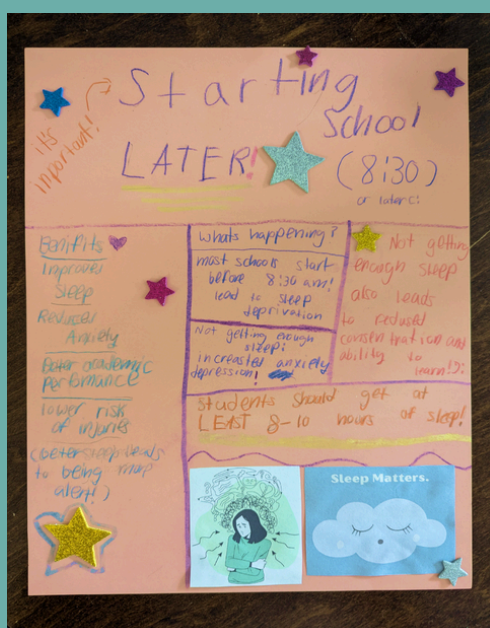
Examples of Spring advocacy products are shown below.



Examples of flyers on mental health, OUD and support



Examples of letter to the mayor asking for mental health support



Example of flyer to encourage delaying school start time



Pharmacy Mentorship

By Leul Amsalu Negussie, MPH

Educating Pharmacists in rural setting on the importance of MOUD/Naloxone

Pharmacists are vital in accessing naloxone and disseminating associated information to community members. Yet stigma often obstructs this service. Hence the COURAGE pharmacy mentorship program led by Tyler Melton PharmD, MPH, BCPS and Jarrod Vick PharmD, BCACP offers pharmacists education and resources to promote the distribution of naloxone and MOUD.

The purpose of the Pharmacist Mentoring Program is to assess pharmacists' knowledge and understanding of Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) following their participation in an asynchronous, on-line Pharmacy Mentorship Program. The training is flexible and self-paced, allowing 20 pharmacists to complete the program on their own schedule while participating in small cohort groups.

After the on-boarding and introduction, participating pharmacists go through the following modules:

- What is MOUD?
- MOUD Stigma and The Bias That Follows
- Clientele Perception and Patient Privacy
- Motivational Interviewing
- DEA Ordering Policies and MOUD Requirements in Community Pharmacy
- Resolving Red Flags
- Naloxone Training and Review
- Drug Take-Back Toolkit and Responsible Disposal Practices

Throughout the program, pharmacists completed short surveys before and after each of the eight learning modules, as well as a final program evaluation to share their feedback and overall experience. Mentoring sessions are provided to ensure participants complete all training modules and accompanying surveys to ensure the entire program is finished.

In addition to the modules, participants go through a Motivational Interviewing Workshop and free Continuing Education credit. After completing the modules, pharmacist participants complete an exit interview.

Findings after the program highlight the importance of focused training programs that strengthen skills and boost confidence in conflict resolution to support patient care in community pharmacies. Interviews to further evaluate the program and to inform ongoing improvements are underway to understand how program participation is related to MOUD dispensing and the reduction of stigma in rural pharmacies.

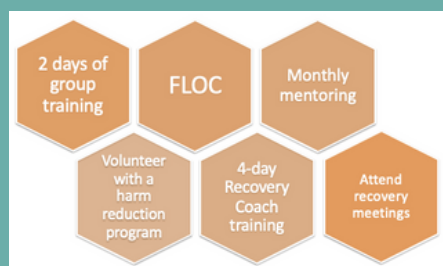


Faith Leaders Overcoming Opioids in the Community

By Su Chen Tan, PhD, MPH and Jennifer Tourville, DNP

FLOC, Faith Leaders Overcoming Opioids in the Community, aims to enhance and expand OUD treatment and recovery services by promoting integrated, interdisciplinary care and reducing stigma amongst faith-based leaders. With over 50 mega churches, Tennessee is touted as the buckle of the Bible belt. Faith leaders, as trusted community members, are uniquely positioned to foster supportive environments for people impacted by OUD.

FLOC is a 4-month mentoring program led by Pastors Kyle Prichard and Marta Cogburn from rural Tennessee congregations. From Fall 2023 to Spring 2025, 5 cohorts of 20 faith-based leaders from Cocke, Claiborne, Union, Sevier, and Jefferson Counties participated in the FLOC program.



FLOC Mentee Testimonials

As a person with lived experience, I still learned so much. And this program wasn't only very informational it also gave me an opportunity to meet other faith leaders in my area and grow wonderful connections. This program is doing amazing things for our rural community!

Elisha Maples, Spring 2025 cohort
Certified Peer Recovery Specialist, Live Free-Claiborne

At first, I was skeptical of the FLOC program. Throughout my entire life, I held beliefs about addiction being a choice & that quitting, albeit difficult, remained a choice one must make. Having gone through the FLOC class, I grew in wisdom & understanding about how addiction mimics that of a disease, physically altering the chemical make-up of someone struggling with Substance Use Disorder. My mind and heart were opened to be more sensitive to people wanting to enter recovery, how to help them in recovery, and give them encouragement once they left recovery. I am very glad I made the decision to go through the program and look forward to being an advocate for people going through SUD.

Neal Folger, Spring 2024 cohort
Director of Intergenerational Ministries,
First UMC Newport



I am in recovery with 8 years of experience working in the field of helping people with active addictions to recover. Going through the FLOC program has helped increase my knowledge on multiple levels such as new resources, harm reduction programs (which are so needed) and many tools for helping to meet others exactly where they are at the moment. I would like to thank God and all the men and women that have devoted their time for others to learn about the many ways to help with recovery.

Beth Miller, Spring 2025 cohort

The FLOC program afforded me the opportunity to become a recovery coach. During my recovery coach training I was able to break domestications within myself and become open minded about the different pathways to recovery which in turn help save many lives and open doors to many who are suffering with SUD. I'm forever grateful for all the knowledge I gained in the FLOC program.

Julia Jones, Spring 2024 cohort
Newport, TN

Within the last year, I retired after thirty-two years of teaching and began working in the recovery ministry. The FLOC program gave me lots of valuable information and resources to use in my new line of work. The things I learned were practical and could be used immediately. Everyone in the program was friendly and very helpful. I enjoyed the program and would recommend it to anyone working with anyone in recovery.

Bob Keaten, Fall 2024 cohort
Administrative Director, The Mission-Sneedville

Completing the FLOC program educated me in the scientific and physical aspects of the effects of addiction on the body and the brain. I learned the "Whys" behind the addiction. One of the most powerful aspects of the program is the emphasis on everyone's program being individually designed. We are all wired differently and what works for one may not work for all. I was challenged to live out what I would be calling others into which is training for living life.

Shane Greg, Spring 2023 cohort
Northview Church – R.E.S.T.O.R.E. Recovery

As an Assistant Pastor in an area stricken by the effects of opioid abuse, the FLOC program has been a huge value in my journey of learning the ins and outs of OUD. My church is in the early stages of standing up a recovery ministry and this program has bridged the gap between the spiritual and educational / science aspects of this disorder. I truly believe that God through His providence allowed this program to come into fruition and I also believe that my FLOC mentor and the staff from the University of Tennessee that coordinates these efforts are truly "God sent"!

Pastor Rocky W. Stafford, Spring 2025 cohort
Parrottsville Church of God



MOUD mentoring program

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By Leul Amsalu Negussie, MPH and Jennifer Tourville, DNP

The East Tennessee Rural Health Consortium (ETRHC) aims to eliminate opioid use disorder by developing healthy communities through health promotion, prevention, collaboration, and improved access to healthcare services. Through ETRHC, COURAGE (Combatting Opioid Use in Rural Appalachia with Grace and Evidence) focuses on expanding medication for OUD (MOUD) treatment services by providing onsite training and mentorship for current and future practitioners. ETRHC is a collaborative effort co-led by the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, and consortium members to address the opioid crisis in eastern Tennessee. Its service area includes 10 rural Appalachian counties: Campbell, Claiborne, Cocke, Grainger, Hamblen, Jefferson, Morgan, Roane, Scott, and Union.

Sustainability

To ensure continuation of mentoring to practitioners beyond the funded grant period, the clinical mentoring sites are being established as permanent preceptorship experiences for future psych-mental health nurse practitioner and rural track medical students. Three rural locations in Knox County and one location in Cocke County will serve as elective learning sites for years to come.

Objectives of the MOUD mentoring program

- Perform comprehensive client assessments to incorporate client needs and available resources for substance use disorders.
- Use evidence-based resources to develop a treatment plan to include both pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions.
- Collaborate with a multi-disciplinary team to ensure that the client's physical, medical, and psychosocial needs are met.
- Identify and implement best practices for routine monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment of client treatment plans.



Hispanic Outreach in East Tennessee: Building Connections, Strategies, and Community Impact

By Rebeca Nieves, MPH

Parent and Youth Sessions

The COURAGE Youth Team, in partnership with Centro Hispano de East Tennessee, launched a Hispanic Outreach initiative to address the rising rates of substance use and overdose deaths among Hispanic youth and families in the region. Between 2018 and 2022, overdose deaths among Hispanic Tennesseans increased by over 300%, with opioids and stimulants being the primary substances involved. [1] The program adopted an ecological approach to prevention – engaging early adolescents, parents, and the broader community through culturally tailored education.

Program Overview

The outreach began by translating educational resources into Spanish and collaborating with local Hispanic-serving organizations. Centro Hispano, a leading community partner, identified a pressing need for substance use disorder (SUD) education and youth prevention strategies. The team developed interactive sessions for parents and youth, focusing on SUD, adolescent brain development, and prevention strategies.

Sessions were offered in both separate (parent-only or youth-only) and combined parent-youth formats. We addressed language preferences and enhanced overall program effectiveness. Each session included three core components:

Education: Presentation content included SUD risks, adolescent development, and prevention strategies.

Discussion: Facilitated conversations to share lived experiences and address cultural factors influencing substance use.

Guided Activities: Role-playing scenarios for parents (positive parenting skills) and youth (developing safe words for uncomfortable situations), fostering open communication and trust.

Materials were adapted with local data, culturally relevant imagery, and case studies reflecting the Hispanic experience in East Tennessee.

Outcomes and Insights

Evaluation of the sessions demonstrated positive impacts on knowledge and engagement. Retrospective pre-post surveys revealed increased understanding of substance use, its effects on the adolescent brain, and prevention strategies among both parents and youth.

Qualitative feedback revealed high satisfaction with the culturally relevant delivery and the facilitator's engaging approach. Youth participants appreciated the clarity and relatability of the instruction, noting, "I understand more than the other teachers," and expressing overall enjoyment. Parents valued the educational content, describing the sessions as "entertaining" and "very educational," and appreciated learning new information. Key insights from the program include the importance of culturally tailored engagement and the effectiveness of mixed-format sessions in reducing stigma and fostering open family communication. The sessions' structure was well received and supported ongoing dialogue at home. The evaluation also reinforced the need for continued education and integration of substance use prevention into existing family and youth programs. Overall, the Hispanic Outreach initiative successfully increased knowledge, strengthened parent-youth relationships, and demonstrated the value of community partnerships and culturally informed strategies in substance use prevention.

References

[1] Tennessee Department of Health, Office of Informatics and Analytics. (2024, February 21). 2022 Tennessee drug overdose deaths. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/documents/pdo/death-report/2022_Tennessee_Drug_Overdose_Deaths.pdf



Drug Takeback Program

By Su Chen Tan, PhD, MPH

The COURAGE Drug Takeback Program promotes the safe and responsible disposal of unused or expired medications through prepaid drug mail-back envelopes distributed through a coordinated network of local healthcare partners. The program offers rural communities a secure and convenient way to discard medications—helping to prevent non-medical use of medications and support overall community health and safety.

From 2023 to 2025, the drug takeback program was supported by 11 partner clinics across four rural counties. These clinics delivered essential services to their communities and represented a diverse range of healthcare settings:

- Dental practices
- Internal medicine
- Nursing homes
- Rehabilitation services
- Primary care services
- Pharmacy
- Veterinary services

The 11 partner clinics are located in Campbell, Claiborne, Cocke, and Jefferson Counties:

- Campbell County – 1 partner clinic
- Claiborne County – 4 partner clinics
- Cocke County – 3 partner clinics
- Jefferson County – 3 partner clinics



Conclusion

Collectively, East Tennessee has made great progress in addressing the opioid crisis. Through COURAGE programs, prevention, treatment, and recovery for OUD have been enhanced through community engaged activities. COURAGE community partners have included faith leaders, pharmacists and youth. Community investment in OUD prevention is critical for continued discovery of opportunities related to prioritized health promotion in rural Appalachia [1].

In addition to COURAGE, organizations and recovery centers are making great strides in tackling the issue. The use of opioid abatement funds with expanded access to MOUD is improving the trajectory of the opioid epidemic in rural East Tennessee. Most importantly, members of the community across professions, including lawmakers, pharmacists and health care professionals, are gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding addiction and recovery, paving the way for more informed and effective policies. These developments are encouraging for health and collaboration of rural communities.

Reference

[1] Schwartz, A. N., Buchanan, Z. V., & Meschke, L. L. (2022). Community Strengths and Challenges Related to Opioid Use Disorder in Rural Counties of East Tennessee. *Journal of Appalachian health*, 4(1), 20–30. <https://doi.org/10.13023/jah.0401.04>



ETRHC meeting



**THREE YEARS OF COURAGE:
OUD PREVENTION IN RURAL EAST TN**

 **July 18, 2025**
1:00 – 2:00 PM

Panel of Speakers

 Joe Hoffman, Director of Live Free Claiborne County	 Marta Cogburn, Minister of Recovery, First United Methodist Church
 Pastor Kyle Prichard, Bethany Church Claiborne County	 Laurie L. Meschke, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
 Mindy Grimm, ICARE Union County	

To register, scan
here or click on the
link below

  <http://tiny.utk.edu/etrhc718> 

Here is the link to rsvp for the consortium meeting.
https://utk.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9KXYvtejFul8ntk

The tiny url for this RSVP link is <https://tiny.utk.edu/etrhc718>



Tennessee Expands Good Samaritan Protections with HB 995

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By Rebeca Nieves, MPH

What's new?

Tennessee's HB 995 broadens Good Samaritan Law protections to cover alcohol-related incidents. Now, individuals who seek emergency help during an alcohol overdose won't face prosecution for certain misdemeanors, including underage drinking and public intoxication.

Why it matters:

This change encourages people to call 911 without fear of legal consequences, potentially saving lives during critical emergencies.

Important note:

The immunity does not apply to alcohol license holders (like bars or servers) acting in their professional roles.

Want to learn more?

Visit [Tennessee General Assembly's HB 995 page](#) or contact your local representative for details.

