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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

# Centra raises awareness on workplace violence, prioritizes staff well-being

Rachael Smith

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Centra's Lynchburg General Hospital.

News & Advance file photo

Rachael Smith

**W**orkplace violence in the health care industry is finally receiving the attention it deserves.

Rob Boesch, chief nursing officer of Lynchburg General Hospital and Virginia Baptist Hospital, said health care workers are five times more likely to experience workplace violence compared to other industries and until now, the focus on preventing workplace violence has been lacking.

“It has been something that health care workers have lived with for such a long time, but we’ve never really had the great awareness, the great advocacy, and honestly the full-fledged focus on preventing workplace violence,” he said.

To address this issue, Centra Health has established a workplace violence steering committee comprising professionals from various disciplines, including providers, nurses and security team members. This committee is dedicated to developing a comprehensive approach to managing workplace violence, encompassing patient care and caregiver training.

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As part of the training initiatives, Centra is working to equip caregivers with the necessary skills to recognize signs of workplace violence, assess risk levels and de-escalate challenging situations. Additionally, the organization is launching a campaign centered on a zero-tolerance policy for workplace violence across its campuses, Boesch said.

He said workplace violence can manifest in various forms, including physical assaults, verbal abuse and non-verbal indicators of aggression.

“Across the country, we have seen violence all the way up to death,” he said. “We have seen people actually been killed in the hospital setting, through patients, through visitors, through acts of aggression. We have seen things such as physical harm, getting into physical altercations at the bedside.”

According to the Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association, state hospitals, nurses and other health care partners successfully worked with the Virginia General Assembly in 2019 to strengthen protections for health care workers performing their job by making it a Class 1 misdemeanor to threaten to kill or harm them while they are rendering care in a hospital, emergency department, or other clinical facility. That law has been updated since then, most recently earlier this year to extend protections to providers rendering care in all health care settings which took effect July 1.

Boesch said health care workers often find themselves in the challenging position of delivering difficult news to patients and their families, and the high-stress environment can elicit different emotional responses.

These acts, including microaggressions and verbal abuse, take a toll on caregivers and contribute to burnout, leading many to leave the profession, he said.

“In this high-stress, high-risk environment, we want people to know that just because there’s a lot of emotions, our caregivers don’t deserve to be treated poorly,” he said. “Our caregivers are here to keep you safe. Our caregivers are here to make sure that you get the very best care possible and deliver the highest quality, safety, value and experience to you. And they can only do that if they are kept safe and if they are in a safe environment.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the issue of workplace violence. The heightened emotions resulting from the pandemic-related stress, limited visitation capabilities and the overall social climate have contributed to a workforce and community struggling with this problem. In response, Centra says it’s committed to creating a safe environment for its staff and patients, recognizing that providing the best care possible relies on the safety and protection of caregivers.

“Our goal is to be the No.1 hospital in the state and I think we have incredible caregivers, we have an incredible community,” Boesch said. “And we want to make sure that our community will not only be cared for now but they’ll be cared for well into the future. And that means continuing to recruit people into the health care industry and that can only take place if it’s an environment that you know that you’re going to not only make an impact, but be rewarded and be valued as a member of that community.”

Wren Roberts, senior director of Support Services and head of the Workplace Violence (WPV) Steering Committee at Centra, said the COVID-19 pandemic brought the issue to the forefront, resetting the level of awareness and emphasizing the need to evolve and engage in proactive measures.

The WPV Steering Committee, in place for nearly two years, focuses on comprehensive programs that encompass preparation, mitigation, response and reflection. Roberts said awareness and education are especially important, ensuring that staff members are informed and equipped to report workplace violence incidents. By implementing a universal reporting tool, Centra aims to address the underreporting of workplace violence cases. As of May 31, more than 75 workplace violence events have been reported across Centra’s four hospital campuses, he said.

Roberts said that the increased number of reported incidents is not necessarily indicative of a sudden surge but rather a result of improved reporting practices and heightened awareness.

The organization recognizes the need for education and de-escalation training to empower staff members to respond effectively to potentially violent situations. This includes active threat training, such as teaching employees how to run, hide and fight in emergencies, as well as de-escalation techniques to defuse tense situations.

In addition to education and training, Roberts said the hospital system has added video surveillance, badge access, security presence and the use of security vehicles strategically positioned to act as deterrents.

“We’ve got about 99 buildings so as we go through physical environmental upgrades, it’s a massive lift. And so it is constantly active,” he said.

Tiffany Lyttle, a patient education and nurse wellness coordinator, said Centra was one of the first to develop information toolkits for recovery after workplace violence. These toolkits aim to provide resources for team members who have experienced such incidents, ensuring that they have support both immediately and in the long term.

Lyttle said it is important to educate hospital leaders on how to care for team members and providing them with the necessary time and space to assess and address their physical, mental and emotional injuries.

“We also want to make sure that our team members understand that reporting is a normal process and create safety and that they are not going to be further subjected to any humiliation or punitive measures,” she said. “They are safe to report because when they report, they create safe environments.”

Drawing from her own experience as a bedside nurse, she said nurses feel love and dedication for their patients, even in challenging situations. She said patients may sometimes behave unkindly due to pain, grief or difficult circumstances, which can inadvertently affect health care providers.

“It can be a barrier to providing good care, and that’s of course when we have to reach out for help and get those additional resources,” she said. “So that’s part of why these toolkits really needed to come into place is because I have been the bedside worker that has faced injury and you are doing the absolute best you can, you are running from room to room making sure that everyone is well taken care of and loved and appreciated and you can hear some pretty terrible things.”

Joe Tulga, corporate director of Emergency Management and Life Safety at Centra, said health care has always been susceptible to disruptive, aggressive and violent behavior, not only from patients and their families but also within the staff itself.

“Some of it’s related to patients, some of it’s related to stress, but you also have to understand that it may not be just patients and family members, we have to make sure we take care of each other and that we’re not aggressive towards each other,” he said.

He said Centra is proactive in educating its employees on how to respond to an active threat through the “run, hide, fight” training approach. Rather than simply showing videos, the system works at the department level to ensure that employees are aware of safe rooms, exits and last resort measures within their respective work areas.

“We teach the whole continuum of violence, meaning that we also need to be recognizing disruptive, aggressive and violent behavior at its earliest stages so we can manage that because a caregiver can just as easily get hurt in a patient’s room, as they can with someone shooting them with a gun,” he said. “And there have been cases in this country where nurses have been seriously hurt just by somebody beating them up in the room.”

Tulga said some patients may exhibit challenging behaviors due to mental health issues, addiction or age-related factors and while Centra strives to provide a safe environment, it also requires support from the community in managing disruptive and aggressive behavior.

“It’s really important that everyone works together in the hospital, and we’re going to try to help you if you’ve got stress but mistreating caregivers just doesn’t help the process at all because we’re going to have to manage that piece of it too,” he said.

**Rachael Smith,**

(434) 385-5482

**rsmith@newsadvance.com**

**By Rachael Smith**

**Reporter**



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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

## Lynchburg-area food banks, pantries call for more SNAP funding

Rachael Smith

Mar 19, 2023



Volunteers at The Daily Bread bag meals on Thursday, March 16.

Paige Dingler, New Era-Progress

Rachael Smith

**T**he cost of food, housing, transportation and health care have increased in recent months.



The additional SNAP benefits put into place in March 2020 during the COVID-19 related shutdowns expired this month, leaving many families stuck between skyrocketing food costs and fewer resources to help put food on the table.

As more people are looking for help in Lynchburg, places like the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, The Daily Bread and Park View Community Mission are feeling the pinch.

Michael McKee, CEO of BRAFB, says the emergency allotments passed during the pandemic were a buffer against all of the turmoil people were experiencing.

More people were out of work, so more people were turning to SNAP.

Statewide, the SNAP program benefits about 800,000 residents — 11% of the population.



Kitchen staff Marein Grunshie (from left), Perrie Butler, and Roger Perkins make meals at The Daily Bread on Thursday, March 16.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

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McKee said the government, together with the nonprofit sector, help to improve food insecurity for millions of Americans. Through the Emergency Food Assistance Program, the government buys up foreign commodities and then contracts with producers to produce shelf stable food such as canned goods, frozen meats and, increasingly, fresh produce, and that food is provided largely to food banks.

“That’s one way the federal government is supporting the nonprofit sector and providing for the food security of our neighbors. But the other most impactful way that government does that is by funding SNAP,” he said.

SNAP allows people to access grocery stores and purchase groceries, just as everyone else does.

Under the Feeding America program, there are more than 200 regional food banks that serve or provide food to about 50 million Americans. Food banks provide enough for about 6.5 billion meals, McKee said.

BRAFB’s network of pantries in the Central Virginia region recorded more than 140,000 visits last year. The most it ever saw was during the height of the pandemic in 2020, which was 141,000 visits in a year.

“The combination of inflation, soaring food costs and now the discontinuation of supplemental SNAP benefits could exceed what we saw during the worst of the pandemic,” he said.

Food prices in U.S. metro areas were up 10% from year ago levels in January, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Breakfasts seem particularly hard hit: Egg prices are up 70%, butter and margarine 32.5%, cereal by 15%, bread by 14.9% and sausage 10.1% — though bacon prices are down slightly. Meat and fresh fruit and vegetable prices generally posted below-average increases, but canned and processed products have increased faster.

BRAFB is buying millions of dollars worth of food to make sure food pantries and local communities stay stocked.

“We’re fully committed to make sure that we have enough food to meet the needs of our neighbors indefinitely. That’s a huge undertaking and does require us to rely more on buying food than on donated food, and that’s not sustainable in the long term,” he said.

Lynchburg Daily Bread, at 721 Clay St. in downtown Lynchburg, has tripled the number of meals it serves and it’s a number that continues to grow each day.

Pre-pandemic, a busy day at the food kitchen would have been 200 or 250 meals per day. Now, it’s had several days when more than 800 meals were served.

In January, Tracey Dixon, executive director at the Lynchburg Daily Bread, said it saw its first 700-meal day and, on March 6, it fed 861 meals — a new daily record.

“We’re seeing a real double whammy because of pandemic-era benefits running out combined with the highest grocery prices we’ve ever seen; it’s really hitting people hard. We’ve seen a lot of people who are working that are needing help from the soup kitchen,” Dixon said. “These are people who have never asked for help before getting food assistance.”

She said when a grocery bill goes from \$60 to \$120 per week, many families don’t have the space to make that up in their budgets.

With the increase in demand, the kitchen is pulling it off, but it hasn’t been easy, Dixon said. Instead of arriving at 6:30 a.m., volunteers now arrive at 5:30 a.m. to begin working on hundreds of meals.

“We keep waiting for a little respite just from the huge volume of people that are in need, and unfortunately, we’ve just grown and grown in meals served since the start of the pandemic and we’ve never shut down and never missed a day,” she said. “It’s a

whole new world for the staff and volunteers but we're certainly ready for things to improve and slow down."

Dixon said many Daily Bread recipients want to be independent and not need the nonprofit's support.

"So we love to see the economy improved, for grocery prices to dial back and to allow people to be able to balance their budget and make ends meet," she said. "I am concerned with the benefits running out combined with summer, which is normally our busiest season because the kids aren't in school getting school breakfast and lunch."

The kitchen is in need of nutritious food donations and ground beef, which can be stretched to make more meals such as chili or beefaroni.

Todd Blake, executive director of Park View Community Mission, said any time there's a reduction in benefits, there will be an increase of neighbors that they serve.

"Many of those families are caught right on the edge of being able to make their grocery budget work and any little variance in that budget is going to be a big impact, and so you couple that with inflated food prices, and that's kind of hit with a double whammy now," he said.

He added the nonprofit isn't getting as much produce as had been and that's caused by myriad of factors from supply chain issues to seasonal changes, but also when there's a higher number of people coming to the food pantry, it only exacerbates the problem. So there's less variety and fewer healthy foods available.

"We always have to keep going to all of our sources, whether it's our donors, grants that we write and hope to be awarded to, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank asking for more, we're going to have to be doing those kinds of things to keep up with the demand," Blake said.

He said people can support the BRAFB and Park View if they want to help and to reach out to area legislators advocating for a strong Farm Bill that will support staff and other supports for food insecure neighbors.

“People who are going to food pantries and receiving SNAP benefits, so many of them are working hard to make their budgets work, to make their grocery bill stretch, they’re working multiple jobs in many cases, some can’t work because of disability or are caring for chronically ill family member,” Blake said. “So just to be mindful that someone who’s receiving SNAP benefits, they are worth the investment of our of our tax dollars, I believe, and we need to make sure that they have good benefits available to them.”

The Richmond Times-Dispatch contributed to this report.

**By Rachael Smith**

**Reporter**

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ALERT FEATURED

## Forest man invents device to control flow of fentanyl from patches

Rachael Smith

Jan 8, 2023



Neil Jackson, shown here on Dec. 22, lives in Forest. He has invented FenBlock, which if approved by the FDA would be a prescription-based, self-controlled device that blocks the flow of fentanyl from a patch.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Rachael Smith

**I**n 2011, Forest resident and former auditor Neil Jackson was diagnosed with chondrosarcoma — a type of cancer that affects the bones and joints. It is a rare cancer that accounts for about 20% of bone tumors.

After undergoing life-threatening surgery and surviving, Jackson, now 73, was in insurmountable pain. He was prescribed morphine and codeine-based drugs including Oxycontin, oxycodone and hydromorphone.

“And then I had 100 micrograms of fentanyl transdermal going through my chest every hour,” he said.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Pharmaceutical fentanyl was developed for pain management treatment of cancer patients, applied in a patch on the skin. Because of its powerful opioid properties, fentanyl also is abused.

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According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, fentanyl is driving the nationwide overdose epidemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that in the 12-month period ending in October 2021, more than 105,000 Americans died of drug overdoses, with 66 percent of those deaths related to synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. Last year, the United States suffered more fentanyl-related deaths than gun- and auto-related deaths combined.

Jackson said fentanyl patch dependency typically forms within two weeks from the onset of prescribed use.

He invented FenBlock to give people control and the freedom to get off fentanyl using their own time line, managing the process themselves without judgment and with their health care provider's support.

“It carries a burden because you're known to be an addict if you're addicted to something and so you really want to not call yourself addicted, so that you don't have that baggage that you're carrying, even in your brain. So you say I'm dependent and there's a very thin line but I was addicted,” he said.

So he decided to do something about it and created FenBlock, a prescription-based, self-controlled device that blocks the flow of fentanyl from a patch.

FenBlock blocks the flow of a transdermal liquid from a fentanyl patch and can be cut into various sizes depending on the amount of the drug a patient is trying to wean off of. The patch is placed in between the fentanyl patch and the skin.

The device is currently pending approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and, if approved, would be available with a prescription from a doctor.

Jackson was prescribed the fentanyl patch after his surgery, but he didn't want to endure residual pain as he stopped using it.

“I wanted to be able to enter that area and say, ‘Too much, I've got to stop. I went far enough,’” he said. “I'll stop and breathe, restart this process in maybe a month from now or two months. I can manage my timeline. If I went to a different patch size, I wouldn't be able to manage my timeline. So I came up with this idea and it worked. And in 14 months, I'm off of fentanyl.”

John Hart is an advisor for Jackson and a board member for Virginia Bio, a biomedical organization that works to promote innovation and growth through networking, advocacy, and capital investment.



He has experience in medical devices with companies including Johnson & Johnson, what is now Medtronic and Stryker Corporation. In the last 20 years he's been the CEO for venture startups and mid-level medical device companies.

Hart thinks FenBlock is a simple, elegant solution to help people wean off a fentanyl addiction.

"There's a number of people that get addicted to fentanyl or opioids based surgical procedures, and that's Neil's story, he got addicted to fentanyl and realized that it was starting to take over his life," he said.

FenBlock blocks the fentanyl patch in percentages and eventually allows a person to wean off of it.

Hart said it's a non-medical, unobtrusive device that can be easily used by anyone who wants to end their addiction.

Jim Parker, an advisor for FenBlock, met Jackson after the two were put in a group assisting University of Lynchburg's Doctor of Physical Therapy students. Parker had a cerebral hemorrhage in 2013 and was volunteering himself to let students practice on him a few years afterward, and Jackson was doing the same.

"A few of us guys used to meet in my garage because it was a nice place to sit, and Neil is in [a] wheelchair and couldn't get around too well, so he could park the van in Parker's garage and come straight in," Parker said. "We started meeting there and talking about the world in general, and at one point Neil mentioned he was in the process of starting FenBlock."

From there, Parker watched Jackson's progression and had seen him over a period of many months where Jackson had gone from being a 7-year addict to weaning himself off the fentanyl patch and other medications.

“I suggested to Neil that the process and device was patentable and the process was something that people could use,” Parker said. “This would really work for people who are really truly interested in weaning themselves off fentanyl and that’s where it’s been developed around.”

Parker said he has seen it personally work as he’s watched Jackson use it and even though he had some back slides and it was a difficult process, Jackson is clean now.

“It’s a tapering process and it’s lifesaving in that respect, because eventually the opioids will kill you if you stay on them,” Parker said. “There’s hope that it can and will work and this device is a simple way to go about it.”

After seeing a local news segment about Allegheny County Sheriff Kevin Hall’s push to end the opioid epidemic, Jackson reached out to ask if Hall would support FenBlock.

Kevin Hall and his son, Ryan, created a documentary, “Heroin: Broken Dreams, Ruined Lives,” in 2017 after Ryan Hall became addicted to opioids after a sports injury, which led to an addiction to heroin. Ryan Hall ended up spending time in prison but has been clean for five years now, his father said in an interview with The News & Advance.

About a month ago, Jackson reached out to Kevin Hall, who has spent 36 years as a drug task officer and has become an expert on the opioid crisis.

“He wanted support of this product so people could get themselves clean,” Hall said. “I have looked at it, and I think it’s another tool for the toolbox for people who are addicted. This would be a blessing to get people weaned off it.”

Hall said he wants people to know if this is a medically viable option, there is hope.

“When you take away someone’s hope, you take away their desire to do better, change their life and get clean,” he said.

By Rachael Smith

Reporter

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