

# MTSU Center for Health and Human Services Newsletter



*Better Health and Well-Being  
for Tennesseans and That of the Nation*



## DISCOVERY

**"WHAT WE KNOW IS A DROP, WHAT WE DON'T KNOW IS AN OCEAN."**

– Sir Isaac Newton

English scientist, mathematician, physicist, astronomer, alchemist, theologian, and author

Sir Isaac Newton is widely recognized as one of the most influential scientists in our world's history and is an important figure in the scientific revolution. He at one time described himself as a man on a vast beach who couldn't resist trying to pick up every stone to see what was under it.

We are again in a season of discovery at CHHS as we seek new research and project endeavors and are finding unexpected opportunities by "leaving no stone unturned." Staying true to our mission

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of “better health and well-being for all,” we are pursuing opportunities that on the surface may not seem to relate to health and well-being, but upon further exploration very much impact both.



Cynthia Chafin, M.Ed.,  
MCHES® CHHS director

As an example, center staff are working on a proposal in conjunction with a new, rural partner in anticipation of a federal grant posting from the Department of Transportation

that will fund transformative infrastructure projects that serve disadvantaged communities. It might include roads and bridges to connect people with needed health care services and programs, employment, resources needed to live healthy and productive lives, and access to outdoor areas and a planned recreational mecca to promote active living and the reduction of chronic disease. While it is early in the planning stages, we are excited about what is to come, including new partnerships on and off campus with nontraditional partners. Leaving no stone unturned has led to an unexpected opportunity.

In addition to new areas of discovery, we are pleased to provide a fall update about our work and what lies ahead. As the center continues its work to promote better health and well-being for all through projects, programs, and research with local, state, and national reach, we remain eager and engaged in important work that impacts the health and well-being of many.

**What's Next?**

CHHS is actively seeking funds to continue the work begun under the externally funded **mental health** grant that ended in October 2021. That grant provided mental health awareness training to our campus community. With each new academic year, we have an opportunity to reach a new incoming group of students, faculty, and staff, so there is an ongoing need for funding and partnerships to continue this important work. CHHS receives inquiries almost every week about mental health programming. We will continue to seek funding for this and would appreciate any leads for possible funding sources. Meanwhile, we continue to offer a self-pay option for departments and other campus groups interested in the program. Details can be found on our [website](#) and later in this newsletter.

CHHS hopes to conduct **opioid use disorder research** in two additional rural Tennessee counties, similar to what is underway in Wilson County under our Rural Communities Response to Opioids Program grant. We are working on a proposal to submit, in anticipation of a grant funding announcement later this year or in early 2023. We also are planning a 2023 submission for a federal grant that would fund the expansion

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of **medication assisted treatment (MAT)** for substance use and opioid use disorder in up to six rural Tennessee communities with an estimated budget of \$3 million. Work continues with a collaboration between CHHS, the MTSU School of Nursing, and other community partners on a proposal to address current needs of the **health care workforce specific to long-term care facilities and nursing homes**. Multiple funding opportunities for this work are being explored. We have an opportunity to expand upon the new Blue Raiders Drink Up 2.0 impact project, which would serve students eligible for SNAP benefits and would further support **fruit and vegetable consumption, healthy lifestyles, and chronic disease prevention**. We will be submitting an application in 2023 during the next grant cycle.

With our current portfolio of research, projects, and programs that focus on substance use disorders, obesity and diabetes prevention, foods and agriculture, environmental health, and workforce development, our gratitude continues for our many partners who make our work possible as we make a difference in the lives of Tennesseans and others throughout the nation. CHHS looks forward to continuing to serve the public in these important areas as well as our campus community through our campus-focused grants.

For those who are not familiar with CHHS, please take an opportunity to visit the [center's website](#) to read more about our work. Previous editions of the CHHS newsletter are posted there, as is additional information on some of the many projects, programs, and research of the center.

**Recent CHHS Projects, Program, and Research Highlights**

- **Opioid prevention focuses on future.** A year into our \$1 million Rural Communities Response to Opioids Program (RCORP) implementation grant, CHHS is anticipating a site visit from Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) and taking steps to ensure that progress made during the three-year grant is sustainable. The grant, which began in September 2021, covers activities and resources in rural Wilson County communities to address the opioid epidemic. CHHS and its partners are finalizing part one of a three-part sustainability plan in preparation for the grant's end date of August 2024. Recent activities include addressing stigma and substance use. The implementation grant has allowed CHHS and its partners to build on the progress from an October 2020 planning grant from HRSA. The project spotlight later in this publication highlights current and ongoing targeted efforts to address stigma and substance use and includes outcomes from a recent countywide billboard campaign.

Work also continues with the Preventing Incarceration in Communities (PIC) Center, which has been tremendously successful and is included later in this newsletter. We continue to provide transportation through this grant to individuals needing a ride to treatment appointments, as well as provide coverage for treatment services based on need.

CHHS, our campus partners, and Wilson County community partners represented by [Drug-Free Wilco](#) look forward to continuing to fight the opioid epidemic and make a difference in the health and lives of

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Tennesseans. This project was highlighted in the [Fall 2021 CHHS newsletter](#) for those who would like to read more about the projects history and early activities.

- **Environmental health and water quality project wraps up in 2022.** CHHS' recent grant from the [Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation \(TDEC\)](#) to address environmental health and water quality will wrap up at the end of the calendar year. The grant began in February 2021 and involves several partners, including the [MTSU Center for Environmental Education](#), [MTSU Department of Environmental Health and Safety Services](#), [MTSU School of Agriculture](#), and members of the TDEC Nutrient Reduction Task Force. CHHS received almost \$60,000 from TDEC to help tackle environmental health and water quality in Tennessee. CHHS is finalizing a dynamic toolkit that provides a robust public education campaign about water quality and the impact of water on human and environmental health. Four populations were targeted through this toolkit: K–12 education, agriculture, waste-water treatment facilities, and the general public. Work continues on completing the toolkit by the end of 2022, as

well as wrapping up other project deliverables including infographics and other digital media content.

- **Agriculture and STEM education project continues regional tour and receives invitations from two magazines.** Content for STEMsational Ag: The Virtual Farm is complete, with the incremental release over the past 18 months of 52 units of agriculture, health, and STEM-focused curriculum for grades K–14. CHHS applied for funding through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Rapid Response Research on COVID-19 grant opportunity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The application was made in partnership with [MTSU School of Agriculture](#) and Fermentation Science faculty. The curriculum was developed for teachers and home-school families in an 11-state area, as well as parents who found themselves in educator roles because of the pandemic.

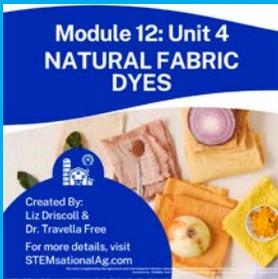
The USDA STEMsational Ag: The Virtual Classroom will have all **52 exciting units** available online **by November 1** for K–14 learners to explore. The curriculum is offered

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**Recently released units include:**

- Cooking on a Budget
- The Honey Jar
- Natural Fabric Dyes
- From Grass to Steak
- Spicing Up Your Garden



**The project has been invited to be included in two science magazines in the coming months, Tennessee Science Teachers Association (TSTA) and Ag Ed.**

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CHHS team members Michelle Sterlingshires and Jill Heather Thomas at the 11th annual Building Expertise Educators' Conference promoting STEMsational Ag: The Virtual Farm curriculum as part of the CHHS STEMsational Ag Southeast Regional Tour. We are proud to serve educators in 11 states with this far-reaching and amazing project! @usdagov @mtsu\_ag #NIFAimpacts

Funding for this project was provided by the office of Carlos Ortiz, PhD, United States Department of Agriculture, National Program Leader, Division of Community and Education, Institute of Youth, Family, and Community. (pictured right in photo at left)

at no cost. Learners can investigate the first steps in raising chickens, how to start a small garden at home, and making their own ham. All units are connected to National Agriculture Literacy Outcomes and are available online, via USB, or as printed copies. Those interested in exploring the units can visit [mtsu.edu/STEMsationalAg/](https://mtsu.edu/STEMsationalAg/) to create a free account for access to all the units. Learn more about this project in the [spring 2021 CHHS newsletter](#).

CHHS STEMsational Ag staff kicked off an 11-state STEMsational Ag Southeast Regional Tour this summer, taking the materials to multiple cities in Tennessee, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and New York. The team will continue its tour in several other states this fall and into 2023.

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**FALL OVERVIEW** *continued from page 5*

- **Blue Raiders Drink Up: Healthy Choices for Healthy Students finishes its third year; new funding begins.** This obesity and diabetes prevention project funded by the Tennessee Department of Health's Project Diabetes initiative has provided opportunities for thousands of MTSU students through twice-monthly campus activities (virtual during COVID-19), access to free counseling sessions with a registered dietitian and/or health coach, personal training scholarships, and cooking classes. Since the kickoff of Blue Raiders Drink Up: Healthy Choices for Healthy Students, our program has gained tremendous momentum and is highly sought out by our student body. From **July 1, 2019, to June 30, 2022**, our team was able to educate **over 6,000 MTSU students** on the importance of reducing the consumption of sugary beverages and installed twelve water refill stations on campus.



We recently received news that a grant application to fund the project for another three years was approved. With **\$450,000** from the Tennessee Department of Health's Project Diabetes initiative, **Blue Raiders Drink Up 2.0** will include formation of a Vending Choice Task Force, a new partnership with the MTSU Food Pantry. We look forward to sharing outcomes from the three-year pilot project as that analysis is complete. You can also read more about it in the [summer 2020 CHHS newsletter](#), and on our [website](#).

- **Workforce training and development: Infant Death Scene Investigation (DSI) and Safe Sleep project virtual classroom.** With support from University College, this workforce training and development project has reached over 34,000 first responders and over 1,700 public health and social services professionals since 2004. DSI training is required for first responders in Tennessee under the Sudden Unexpected Infant Death Act. As part of this training, responders also learn about sudden unexpected infant death (SUID) and safe sleep for infants. The externally funded project on safe sleep offers additional training opportunities for other public health and social services professionals.

The training transitioned to a virtual classroom format because of COVID-19, which was a challenge but ultimately very successful with the support and hard work of University College. Trainers and speakers, including the state medical examiner, have historically provided an interactive daylong training for first responders. The virtual format continued through the 2021–22 grant year and is being looked at as a model to complement live trainings in the future. The virtual option offered accessibility to training for first responders across the state who may not be able to travel even without COVID restrictions, increasing opportunities for participation. The project was featured in the [summer 2021 CHHS newsletter](#) for those who would like to learn more. The project filled a gap for provider training within the first responder community and within health and social services fields.

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**FALL OVERVIEW** *continued from page 6*

- Campus-focused mental health awareness funding sought, and “self-pay” model is in motion!** In October 2021, CHHS wrapped up its third year of a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) funded grant that supported the Mental Health First Aid program on campus. Over 1,100 students, faculty, and staff were trained in Mental Health First Aid since the program was launched on campus in 2018. As a result of this training, there were over 1,200 referrals to mental health services both on campus and in the community. CHHS continues to seek funding to offer training at no cost to interested departments on campus. Meanwhile, we are piloting a “self-pay” model for departments with a budget to offer the training. We have received requests from three departments on campus to offer the self-pay training and have our first corporate training planned for a large national corporation seeking to train 30 of its c-suite executives and managers.
- Partnerships and collaborations continue.** CHHS continues to identify collaborators and partners both on and off campus to be involved in CHHS projects, programs, and research. Look for more updates via this quarterly CHHS newsletter, the CHHS website, and social media.



## Want to donate to further the work of MTSU's CHHS?

**MTSU CHHS operates primarily through external funding.** To continue our mission of promoting health and well-being for all Tennesseans and that of our nation, we need financial resources to continue our work. We operate from public and private grants as well as sponsorships and donations.

**Please consider a donation of any size, which will go directly to CHHS.**

Visit [mtsu.edu/chhs](https://mtsu.edu/chhs), click on Donate Now, and specify that your donation is for CHHS. The site accepts MasterCard, VISA, and American Express.

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# Project Spotlight

## Rural Communities Opioid Response Program: With Implementation Funding, Plans Turn Into Actions

CHHS received a \$1 million Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) implementation grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in September 2021, allowing us to implement activities and secure needed resources in rural Wilson County communities to address the opioid epidemic over a three-year period. This funding provided a transition from activities begun in October 2020 under a planning grant from HRSA. CHHS, our campus partners, and Wilson County community partners represented by [DrugFree WilCo](#) look forward to continuing to fight the opioid epidemic and make a difference in the health and lives of Tennesseans. This project was highlighted in the [fall 2021 CHHS newsletter](#) for those who would like to read more.

*CHHS Director Cynthia Chafin has lost two loved ones to substance use disorder and understands the importance of this grant and the potential for impact. She lived in Wilson County for over a decade as a teenager and young adult, so this project is near and dear to her heart. "Substance use and the opioid epidemic is taking lives and hurting families and communities. Applying for and receiving this grant is one way that CHHS can make a difference in this tragic epidemic facing so many in our nation."*

*"It was an incredible opportunity to be a part of the data collection team. I have gained so much experience and confidence by approaching strangers and requesting their thoughts and opinions anonymously on a very important topic."*

Maimoonah Dabshee,  
Health and Human Performance student  
and RCORP CHHS project assistant

In the spring, we highlighted three core initiatives that are part of the RCORP grant and recently wrapped up: medication assisted treatment (MAT) training for Wilson County law enforcement, HRSA-sponsored billing and coding training for recovery treatment center staff, and development of a data dashboard for opioid overdoses that would allow for improved data sharing, interagency communications, and decision-making. Transportation is being provided to patients needing transportation to treatment, and qualifying patients are now having treatment costs covered through the grant. We are currently wrapping up part one of a three-year, three-part sustainability plan with the local coalition for work to continue when the grant ends in August 2024. Project outcomes will be shared at the end of the project.

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PROJECT SPOTLIGHT *continued from page 8*



**Stigma Reduction in Opioid and Substance Use Disorder (OUD/SUD)**

The CHHS RCORP team and our partners are implementing activities that focus on stigma reduction. With DrugFree Wilco, unified and cohesive messaging across multiple platforms was developed, including through six billboards placed around Wilson County and funded by the MTSU CHHS HRSA RCORP grant. In addition to targeted messaging, these billboards connect

*“This was a great experience and allowed us to hear many stories about people being prescribed opioids and losing loved ones due to opioids.”*

Kira King,

Health and Human Performance student  
and Fall 2022 CHHS intern

individuals to local resources, continued work with jail-based programming, and work with the local Preventing Incarceration in Communities Center. Data were collected within the Wilson County area before the billboards went up in the spring and again in August, months after the billboards were taken down, at the Wilson County Fair – Tennessee State Fair. With the assistance of eight MTSU Health and Human Performance

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**Stigma**

*“The Center for Health and Human Services at MTSU has shown time and again its commitment to community engagement and health improvement through its initiatives. The work being done alongside DrugFree WilCo to fight fatal and nonfatal overdoses due to opioids is critical to saving lives in Wilson County. The stigmatization of those that use drugs has real life-and-death consequences. In this project, we are attempting to assess the level of stigma in the community and amongst providers (health, service, law). Documenting levels of stigma is one step*

*out of many to fighting it successfully. It provides awareness and a launching point for education and promotion campaigns.*

*“Assessing communities for health needs and risks can be challenging. Engaging with community partners is critical and is a strong predictor to success through my experience working with other communities. By partnering with Drug Free WilCo, collecting qualitative interviews, and getting out into the community and asking folk what they think of drugs and drug users, we are being enlightened to the level of education that needs to be promoted.”*

Kahler Stone, Dr.P.H.

## Data Collection at the Fair

*"I volunteered for this opportunity knowing I do not usually enjoy approaching or being approached by strangers. Walking up to people made me acutely aware of how I perceive others. I was selective in who I approached due to some factors such as whether the potential survey participants had children with them, but also, I noticed I only approached people who seemed to be in a positive mood and had relaxed, open body language. I think many people have an innate fear of rejection, and I believe me choosing the friendlier people was my way of avoiding that feeling. Because of this, I likely ended up with the lowest number of surveys but identified a weakness I have, and working on that now will benefit me in my career in public health."*

Jocelyn Rajkowski,  
Health and Human Performance student



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**PROJECT SPOTLIGHT** *continued from page 9*

students led by Kahler Stone, our RCORP data coordinator and co-principal investigator, post-data were collected from those attending the fair.

**Measuring Stigma—Data Analysis Underway**

We know that reducing stigma through education and awareness is important to prevent opioid overdoses, but how do we measure the amount or level of stigma in a community to begin with? The CHHS RCORP team, in collaboration with M.P.H. students at MTSU, developed a questionnaire to measure components of stigma based on previous research. Students and staff attended the Wilson County and State Fair of Tennessee on four days between August 18–27, 2022, and collected over 400 completed questionnaires (N=407) from 41 Tennessee counties. The majority (54%) of the questionnaires were from adults in Wilson County. The data analysis is currently underway looking at stigma and different associations.

- 53% of Wilson County residents reported seeing DrugFree WilCo billboards sporadically or more. Those billboards included positive messaging and linked viewers to important substance use resources in the community.

**Participating students:**

Chipper Smith	Gabrielle Chesak
Maimoonah Dabshee	Imuwahen Uzzi
Kira King	Patience Akanwogba
Jocelyn Rajkowski	Sherry Jernigan

*“Collecting data on a Saturday at the Wilson County Fair is an experience I’m not sure you can get many other places. Over 100,000 people came to the fair that day in the heat to eat fried foods, ride rollercoasters, and see exhibits. People were definitely not expecting to be asked questions regarding their internal dispositions towards substance use. Nevertheless, I learned how to leverage the ‘college student card’ to sway people into sharing their thoughts. I was taken aback by the number of people I administered the survey to that shared a story of someone they knew passing away unexpectedly from an overdose shortly after graduating from rehabilitation programs. At the same time, even if people had been personally affected by addiction, many were still likely to express a sense of hesitation or dangerousness upon people who are dependent upon substances. I know without a doubt that this experience will be invaluable for my future data collection adventures in my public health career.”*

Chipper Smith, M.P.H.

August 2022 MTSU graduate and  
CHHS RCORP project assistant



# Community Partner Spotlight

## Preventing Incarceration in Communities (PIC) Center Wilson County, Tennessee

In 2020, there were 79 overdose deaths in Wilson County, according to the Tennessee Department of Health. In the entire state of Tennessee, that number was 3,023 deaths due to overdoses. Various initiatives have been implemented in Wilson County to help reduce overdose deaths. One of the biggest successes in Wilson County has been the diversion center – otherwise known as the PIC Center (Preventing Incarceration in Communities). The work of the PIC center complements the work plan of the MTSU RCORP project and we are pleased to include them as part of the \$1.0 million HRSA-funded RCORP grant activities and workplan.



Derrell Seigler is the program director for the PIC Center, and his goal is to help give those with substance use issues a second chance after a drug-related criminal charge. PIC Center clients are referred directly from the Wilson

County district attorney's office, usually after an arrest or a recent incarceration. Clients report to the PIC Center for an initial assessment, and then are referred to a suitable treatment facility. Progress is reported from the treatment facility on a weekly basis, with follow-up assessments at the PIC Center after one month, three months, and then six months. After clients graduate from the program, the PIC center is an advocate for their charges to be dropped based on their participation in treatment.

Gratitude is extended to District Attorney General Jason L. Lawson, an alumnus of Middle Tennessee State University ('99), for his help and cooperation. Without Lawson's guidance in helping build the policies and procedures of the PIC Center, it probably would never have come to fruition. The results of the project are significant. Since the program was started in 2022, there have been 15 graduates. The current number of active clients is 40. To date, there has been an 80% success rate. We believe that the PIC Center is a key initiative to reducing the recidivism rate in Wilson County and getting clients the treatment they need to lead successful lives.



# Trying to drink more water?

Here's a map of water refill stations on campus!



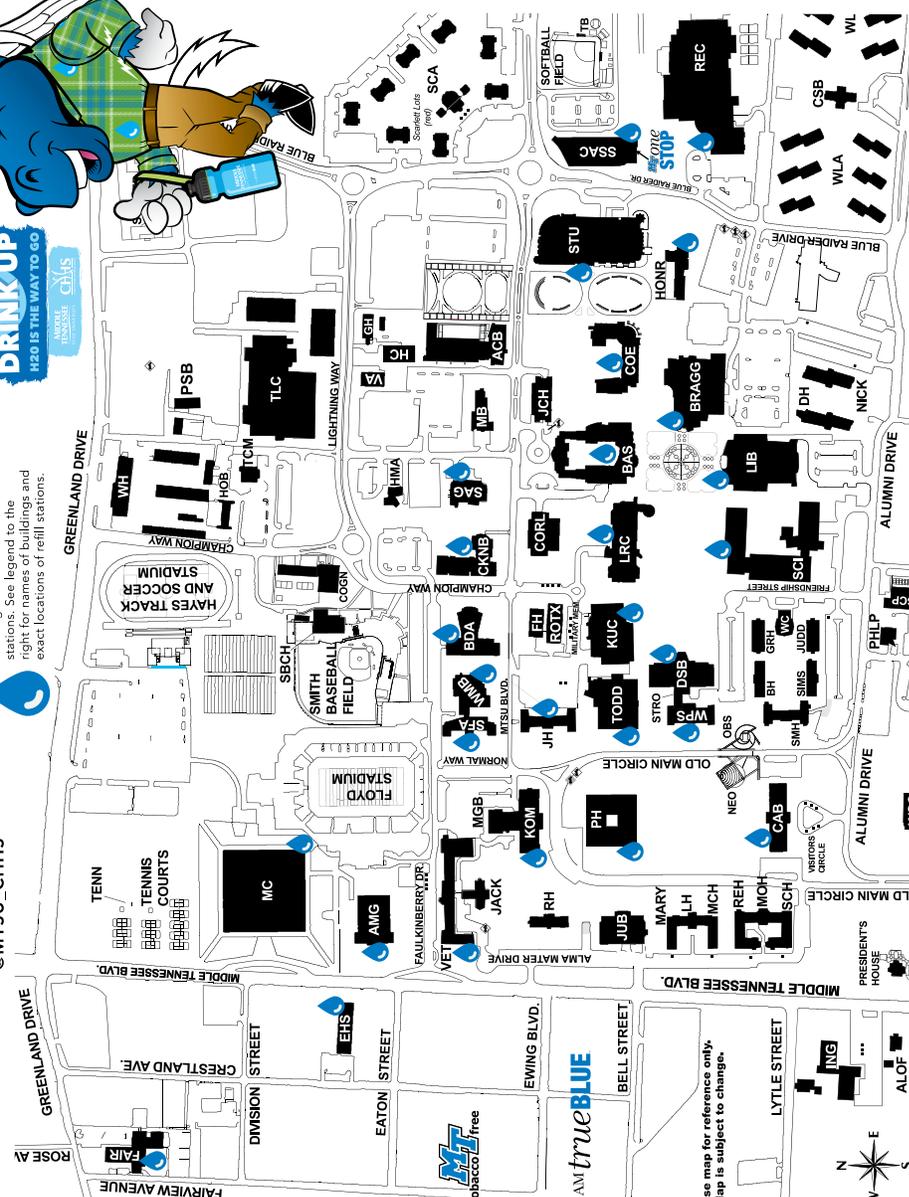
## BLUE RAIDERS DRINK UP

### Water Refill Stations Map

@MTSU\_CHHS

Building with water refill stations. See legend to the right for names of buildings and exact locations of refill stations.







**BLUE RAIDERS DRINK UP**  
WATER REFILL STATIONS  
**#H2O IS THE WAY TO GO**

**AMG** Alumni Memorial Gym  
1-First Floor, 3-Second Floor\*

**BAS** Business and Aerospace Building  
1-First Floor, 1-Second Floor, 1-Third Floor

**BDA** Bouxwell Dramatic Arts Building  
1-First Floor, 1-Second Floor

**BRAGG** John Bragg Media and Entertainment Building  
1-Second Floor

**CAB** Cape Administration Building  
1-First Floor, 1-Second Floor

**CKNB** Carson-Kennedy Nursing Building  
2-First Floor, 1-Second Floor\*

**COE** College of Education Building  
1-First Floor

**DSB** Davis Science Building  
2-First Floor

**EHS** Ellington Human Sciences Building  
1-First Floor

**FAIR** Fairview Building  
1-First Floor

**HONR** Paul W. Martin Sr. Honors Building  
1-Second Floor

**JH** Jones Hall  
1-First Floor, 1-Third Floor\*

**KOM** Kirksey Old Main  
1-First Floor

**KUC** Keathley University Center  
1-Second Floor

**LIB** James E. Walker Library  
1-First Floor, 1-Second Floor

**LRC** Ned McWhirter Learning Resources Center  
1-First Floor\*

**MC** Murphy Center  
4-First Floor\*

**PH** Peck Hall  
1-Second Floor

**REC** Health, Wellness, and Recreation Center  
1-First Floor, 1-Second Floor

**SAG** Stark Agriculture Center  
1-First Floor

**SCI** Science Building  
1-First Floor

**SFA** Saunders Fine Arts Building  
1-Second Floor, 1-Third Floor\*

**SSAC** Student Services and Admissions Center  
1-First Floor, 1-Second Floor

**STU** Student Union Building  
1-Second Floor

**TODD** Andrew L. Todd Hall  
1-First Floor\*, 1-Second Floor

**VET** Voochies Engineering Technology  
1-First Floor

**WMB** Wright Music Building  
1-First Floor, 2-Second Floor\*

**WPS** Wise-Pates Science Hall  
1-First Floor

This program is funded under an agreement with the State of Tennessee.  
 \* Funded by Blue Raiders Drink Up  
 0827.0863.37 Middle Tennessee State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. For more information, contact the Office of Institutional Equity, 1000 University Blvd., Room 1000, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. Website: [www.mtsu.edu/oei](http://www.mtsu.edu/oei)

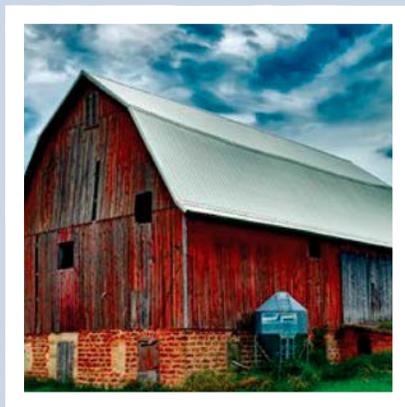
CHHS installed nine water refill stations across campus over the last three years and distributed 1,493 water bottles to students. There were 26,526 refills made from these water stations. Water bottles will continue to be provided during 2022-2025.

**MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY**

# Whom Do We Serve?

The Center for Health and Human Services collaborates with MTSU faculty and staff, and public and private organizations and partners, to develop and implement local, regional, and statewide programs, projects, and research activities designed to improve the health and well-being of Tennesseans and of the nation. Did you know that much of our work involves off-campus initiatives? One of the more

common misconceptions about CHHS is that we solely serve the campus community. While some of our efforts do focus on our campus, the majority of our work is done in communities across Tennessee, some of which serve as models for other states. Our projects have touched all 95 Tennessee counties, with some involving multistate partnerships and others having national impact.



Ash Abro and Rose Chilsen, recent Dietetics graduates and former CHHS staff.

## CHHS Campus Resources

**MTSU Mental Health First Aid**



**Mental Health FIRST AID**

from NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

**CHHS is now offering MHFA training as a self-pay program to interested departments. Efforts to secure external funding to cover costs of training remain underway. Over the last three years, over 1,100 have been trained through MTSU Mental Health First Aid. Learn more at [mtsu.edu/chhs](https://mtsu.edu/chhs)!**

To support continuing Mental Health First Aid workshops beyond fall 2021, CHHS is seeking grant opportunities as well as individual and corporate sponsorships and donations. Information on how to donate is available on the [CHHS website](https://mtsu.edu/chhs). Please include a notation that funds are for CHHS Mental Health First Aid. For departments with a budget to cover the costs of training, CHHS is pleased to facilitate training sessions of up to 30 participants. Please contact us for details.

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# Staff Spotlight

## Jill Thomas

Jill Thomas may already be a familiar face. While she currently shines as the project coordinator for STEMsational Ag: The Virtual Farm, this is far from her first experience at CHHS and MTSU. The project, funded by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, is education focused and brings together Thomas' previous experience at CHHS and as an educator at schools in Rutherford County, making it a perfect fit for her background.

Thomas graduated from her home state's University of Minnesota with a degree in Spanish, including a semester of studying abroad, and still loves to travel. In 2007, she joined CHHS on a tobacco-related grant as coordinator and worked with Tennesseans and schools in multiple middle Tennessee counties. She proceeded to take on the coordinator role for a variety of grants to keep Tennesseans healthy for the next eight years.

Graduating with a master's degree in Elementary Education from MTSU in 2014, Thomas moved



on to work in the county's public schools, eventually returning to campus to be full-time faculty in the College of Education. She learned of the STEMsational Ag project and, finding the open position of



project coordinator an excellent match with her background and education, rejoined the Lytle House crew.



Thomas has been married for 28 years to Reed Thomas, the director of bands at MTSU. They have two daughters together, as well as two "bonus" daughters. The youngest of seven siblings from Minnesota, Thomas does in fact love the snow and skiing. In addition to those already mentioned, her many hobbies and interests include water skiing, photography, riding horses with her sister in Minnesota, and animals. At one point she had two dogs, two cats, a bird, a snake, and—for a short time—a goldfish.

Thomas' favorite quote fits her well: "Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." —Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Between the difficulties of the COVID pandemic and the sheer size of the grant (coordinating dozens of people during its course, coordinating and going on the STEMsational Ag Southeast Tour), Thomas has handled the bumps in the road of The Virtual Farm with grace, creativity, and the energy to "make it work," all the while both having fun and making it so for others. CHHS is glad to have her back on the team.

## New Employees

### Lisa Sheehan-Smith, Ed.D.

Lisa Sheehan-Smith joined the Blue Raiders Drink Up (BRDU) team as the new cooking class instructor at the beginning of the BRDU 2.0 grant cycle, July 2022. After a wonderful 25-year career as a Nutrition and Food Science professor at MTSU, she is now in a post-retirement role and wearing multiple True Blue hats! First, she is teaching part time, mainly in the Leadership in Nutrition M.P.S. program and providing support to the new Dietetics program director, a position she previously held for 17 years. Since she enjoys staying manageably busy, she has taken on a new role and is very pleased to be teaching the BRDU cooking classes.

She has followed this program since its inception in 2019, and there are two aspects she finds exceptional and unique. First, it provides a positive and empowering environment in which MTSU students can learn about and practice nutritious and delicious eating/drinking habits that will help them develop a sustainable, healthy lifestyle. Secondly, the program has provided



MTSU Dietetics students the opportunity to learn how to teach nutrition and lead their peers, which will prepare them for their future careers as registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs).



Now that Sheehan-Smith is beginning a new phase of life, she is reimagining her “free” time by incorporating her long-running activities and passion with an exploration of possible new ones. For instance, she and her husband of almost 30 years

thoroughly enjoy history. While they do not have any plans for long-distance trips, they are planning shorter trips where they can both learn about the history of the United States and try out new bed-and-breakfast places to stay along the way. She will ensure that she has time for her three long-standing passions: volunteering at the Franklin Theatre, figure skating, and hosting tea parties. Figure skating is a unique way to stay fit, fuel her competitive nature, and create community through the Nashville Figure Skating Club. She just began the 2022–23 season and hopes to end by competing for the fifth time at the U.S. Adult Figure Skating Championships in April 2023.

Her interest in nutrition began during high school, when she needed to support her competitive gymnastic and baton twirling training programs. However, when she formally began her dietetics education, she soon learned that her over-emphasis on calories was not the best approach. The plan to pursue a career as an

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RDN was decided in her last year in high school. What prompted this decision was that she met an inspiring RDN, a member of the health care team who took care of her dad when he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. With the RDN's support and education, she was able to help her dad make significant changes in his eating habits that turned his life around!

When asked what her favorite quote is, Sheehan-Smith said, "Prune off activities that fill your day, but don't add to your life." Her thoughts behind this quote are that in this 24/7 society in which we live, it is often difficult to say no, causing us to take on activities that don't add meaning to our lives and end up being a burden. She wants to fill her days with meaningful activities that enrich not only her life but the lives of others as well.

Her defining traits are being highly organized and managing her time well to get the "job" done yet remembering to take time to inspire others in reaching goals. Something we all should strive for!

Lastly, her advice she wants to share to incoming MTSU freshmen, graduating seniors, and anyone in between is: "I encourage you to adopt my favorite quote shared earlier in this interview. For incoming MTSU freshmen, enjoy the college experience to the fullest by taking advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. For graduating seniors, your challenge is 'to make a life while making a living,' a favorite quote of mine by Mark Sanborn, the author of *You Don't Need a Title to be a Leader.*"

The Center for Health and Human Services is honored to have Lisa Sheehan-Smith join our Blue Raiders Drink Up team. As you can see, she excels at everything she does, is passionate about others, and will be a wonderful asset to the team.

If you are interested in joining one of our upcoming cooking classes with Sheehan-Smith, visit our Instagram (@[mtsu\\_chhs](#)) or Facebook account for more information on how to sign up!

## Domanique Richards

Domanique Richards joined the Blue Raiders Drink Up (BRDU) team at the beginning of the new grant cycle in July 2022. She is serving as the BRDU project assistant and second student ambassador, alongside MTSU senior Taylor Armistead. Richards is also a senior in the MTSU Dietetics program and is involved in the Food Science Association, holding the position of the MTSU community garden coordinator.

Richards first became interested in nutrition at a very young age when her mother would hide the saltshaker from her. Heart disease has been in both sides of her family for generations. Unlike many, she was fortunate enough to have

parents who are knowledgeable about the risk factors associated with this disease and raised her to have healthy eating habits. The science behind how and why food can affect the body fascinates Richards. She loves and feels passionate about teaching people this essential



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information by relating it to their lifestyles, genetics, and mental and physical health.

Richards' favorite aspect of the BRDU program is the direct interaction with students from a variety of different programs and departments on campus. "Unfortunately, the Ellington Human Sciences Building is basically an island," she says. "We are relatively isolated from the rest of campus, so we don't get a lot of opportunity to interact with other students on a day-to-day basis." The BRDU program gets students out of their comfort zones and helps them build a community of their own!

Since Richards joined the team just a little over three months ago, she has educated over 491 MTSU students in the first quarter alongside her co-ambassador, Taylor Armistead, through on-campus educational events.

Her current primary focus is having the most successful senior year possible. She is a very driven and determined student, keeping her grades high while trying to narrow down where she would like to go for her dietetic internship as well as graduate school. She is most passionate about the environment and trying to find ways to create a future world better than the one we live in now. When not working on school or the



BRDU program, she can be found outside enjoying the sunshine, exercising her green thumb by taking care of her personal plants, or loving on her dog, Luna. Additionally, the most prominent defining trait she embodies is conscientiousness. It is important to her to act with care and compassion while doing her part as an agent for change.

When asked what advice she had for incoming MTSU freshmen, she said, "To incoming freshmen: My most significant piece of advice is to get involved. Find a club or organization with

values that match yours and become an active participant. These next four years should be full of self-growth, discovery, introspection, and truly discovering the person you want to be. You have an incredible opportunity to make connections, both personal and professional. That person sitting to the left of you could be someone that offers you a job someday, or they could become one of your closest friends. Keep an open mind, learn to leave judgment at the door, and don't forget to take care of yourself."

Richards is kind, upbeat, outgoing, smart, and always up for a challenge. She has proven in her short amount of time with BRDU to be such a wonderful addition to the CHHS team.

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## Maimoonah Dabshee

CHHS is pleased to introduce M.P.H. student Maimoonah Dabshee as part of the CHHS team joining Chipper Smith in the project assistant role. We asked her to share a brief introduction, which is included below. Welcome, Maimoonah!



“Hello fellow Blue Raiders! I am so excited to be a part of the MTSU Rural Communities Opioid Response Program team as a project assistant at CHHS! I am beyond grateful for this amazing opportunity. This project will address opioid usage to prevent overdoses within Wilson County, Tennessee. Being a part of RCORP will help me improve the health and quality of life in in this Tennessee community.

“I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Community and Public Health from MTSU in spring 2021. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Public Health program at MTSU and plan to graduate with my M.P.H. in fall 2023. This career path allows me to be the best version of myself in the ever-changing American health care system. I am currently working as a graduate research assistant in the Department of Health and Human Performance at MTSU. I assist in the execution of an externally funded research project in identifying Alabama’s state level policy levers for the implementation of syringe exchange services.”

## Fall 2022 CHHS Student Intern Kira King

CHHS is also pleased to introduce Kira King as CHHS fall 2022 student intern. Kira’s brief introduction is included below. Welcome, Kira!



“Hello Blue Raiders! I am currently in my last semester in the Master of Public Health program and excited to intern with CHHS. This fall, I am helping with updating the Sudden Unexpected Infant Death and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Bereavement Guide, which is essential for trained first responders when there is a death of an infant at a scene. I am grateful for the opportunity of benefiting families who are grieving over the loss of their infants. I have also gained more knowledge on maternal and environmental risk factors associated with SUID/SIDS.

“Additionally, I volunteered with the RCORP (Rural Communities Opioid Response Program) grant to help collect data at the Wilson County-Tennessee State Fair. Going around collecting surveys at the fair led me to meet people who have experienced a loss of a loved one due to opioids, addiction due to prescriptions of opioids, and denial of written opioid prescriptions.

“I really enjoy learning more about nutrition. In spring of 2020, I graduated from the Nutrition and Food Science program. Having worked as a weight-loss consultant, I realized that a one-size-fits-all approach to a “perfect diet” is not possible considering there are many who have diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and either an over- or underactive thyroid. I never realized the impact I had on people’s lives until I sat one-on-one with them. In the future, I want to become more knowledgeable in exercise science, so I can continue to work with those one-on-one to reach their health goals.”

## Staff News

### CHHS Team Member Enrolls in Doctoral Program

Michael "Mike" Ayalon, CHHS RCORP program coordinator and founder of Greek University, is on the other side of the classroom. Ayalon enrolled in the MTSU Assessment, Learning, and Student Success doctoral program with a Higher Education concentration this semester.

Ayalon has served as the CHHS Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) coordinator since the center received its RCORP planning grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in 2020. Ayalon was a founding member of DrugFree WilCo, a local substance use prevention coalition and vital community partner that works collaboratively with CHHS on the RCORP grant. At the conclusion of the current HRSA RCORP implementation grant, Ayalon will have a key role in sustaining activities in the Wilson County area. With the expertise



he will gain in his doctoral program, Ayalon will be able to serve as a resource for evaluation activities for the coalition after the grant ends.

"We must have the best and most current assessment tools available to demonstrate our progress to the Wilson County consortium, community stakeholders, and HRSA," Ayalon said. "County decision-makers may choose to reallocate dollars toward these new initiatives with savings in places such as the

county jail as we hope to see the recidivism rates drop in our county as a result of the new diversion center, for example (called the PIC Center, or Preventing Incarceration in Communities)."

His MTSU degree program will equip Ayalon with the skills he needs to be effective in his future activities with the local coalition.

### CHHS Director Excited about Final Year of Ph.D. Program

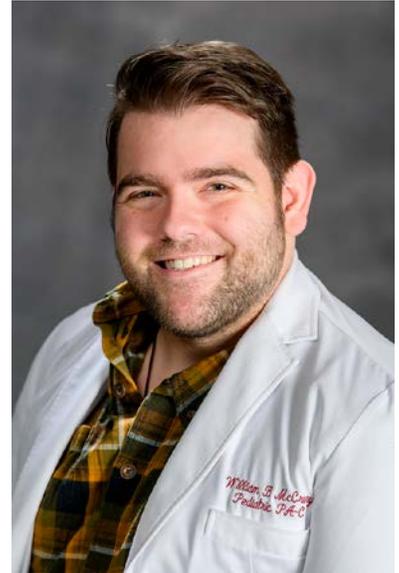
CHHS Director Cynthia Chafin has been a student in the MTSU Health and Human Performance Department's Ph.D. program since 2018. Slow and steady wins the race! As of fall 2022, she has moved to the dissertation phase and hopes to graduate with a Ph.D. in Human Performance, with a specialization in Health, in May or August 2023. Going through this rigorous program has enhanced her knowledge in many areas that directly relate to her job as director of CHHS.

In particular, she has gained important research skills that will set the stage for enhanced research work of the center as it continues its 5-year record growth. Chafin is grateful for all of her supporters and encouragers and looks forward to completing her degree in 2023.



# Project Spotlight and CHHS Campus Collaborations

## Health & Human Performance AND Physician Assistant Studies



### Health and Human Performance

#### **Kahler Stone, D.P.H., Assistant Professor**

The Center for Health and Human Services has had a partnership with Health and Human Performance faculty for decades. As part of this newsletter, CHHS would like to give a special shout-out to Dr. Kahler Stone, who has served as data coordinator and co-principal investigator on the CHHS Rural Communities Opioid Response Program grant since 2020. Stone has been an invaluable part of the CHHS RCORP team.

Read more about Stone's work and the HHP students who recently assisted us with data collection for the project's large-scale activities beginning on page 8. We appreciate you, Dr. Stone!

### Physician Assistant Studies

#### **Marie Patterson, D.H.S., M.S.M.D., Director**

#### **William Bradley McCrary, M.M.S.C., Assistant Professor**

The MTSU Center for Health and Human Services staff and Physician Assistant Studies faculty have been collaborating over the last six months in conjunction with stakeholders in Trousdale and Cannon counties, for purposes of submitting a grant application early next year to address opioid and substance use disorder in those two rural communities. Building upon successes of the current CHHS RCORP grant, CHHS Director Cynthia Chafin hopes to gain momentum toward addressing issues identified by each of the two

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counties. Chafin has working relationships in Trousdale County, and the PA faculty have strong linkages to Cannon County.

*The MTSU Physician Assistant Studies faculty are on board for addressing the drug epidemic with CHHS. "Not only can we make a difference in our local communities should we receive grant funding, but we can make a difference with our Physician Assistant Studies students, as well. I envision placement opportunities for them that will give the local communities additional needed support while also providing learning opportunities for students. We are so excited about this partnership with MTSU CHHS and with our community partners in Cannon and Trousdale counties."*

Marie Patterson

Marie Patterson reached out to CHHS to inquire about partnership opportunities as her research interests include rural health and substance use. CHHS, Patterson, and Assistant Professor William "Brad" McCrary have been visiting the communities and holding discussions and planning meetings with stakeholders over the last six months. Local teams have completed an assessment process and identified areas of interest. School-based programming and treatment recovery programs—in particular for women and children—have been discussed, along with other areas of need.

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), research indicates that individuals living in rural America who need help with opioid and other drug addiction are falling through the cracks and oftentimes losing their lives. There are insufficient treatment services to meet demand, and access to quality medical care, resources, and training is limited in rural areas, in particular for special populations such as pregnant women, parents, and seniors. The Center for Health and Human Services has as part of its mission and vision "better health and well-being for Tennesseans and that of the nation." That includes our rural Tennessee communities. With Tennessee being approximately 93% rural (Tennessee Department of Health) and with some 70 of 95 counties having at least 50% of their residents living in the 38,330 square miles of rural Tennessee, we have an opportunity to make an impact.

*"Cannon County is important to me as a longtime resident and as a health care provider. It feels good to give back to my own community and to have our students involved. Communities across the nation are struggling. As health care providers and as community members and neighbors, we want to help be part of the solution."*

Brad McCrary

CHHS has invited faculty from other departments to also participate in this proposed project and looks forward to sharing more updates as the application process continues.

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