

# N R V C S

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NEW RIVER VALLEY COMMUNITY SERVICES

Summer 2020 | [nrvc.org](http://nrvc.org)

# hard conversations

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addressing systemic racism and social injustice

# The time has come to have hard conversations

As we continue to address client needs and staff safety during the COVID-19 crisis, we now find ourselves at a new place of concern and confusion due to the events that are unfolding in communities across our country.

The uncertainties brought about by the social discord and racial tensions playing out on our nation's streets – all of which is being broadcast nightly on television and via social media – finds me (once again) working through my own fears, frustrations, and fatigue – just like many of you.

These emotionally-charged events weigh heavily on us – individually and as an organization. NRVCS has always worked diligently to ensure that the needs of our communities and our fellow citizens are met. However, I must admit that there have been moments over the last few months when I just did not know what we could do to help because the issue at hand felt so insurmountable.

Most of us recognize that the oppression and injustices brought on by racism are as senseless as they are devastating. Yet, these acts have been documented for centuries and are so deep-seeded and ingrained in sectors of our society that it seems almost impossible to eradicate them.

NRVCS has a long and proud history of advocating for vulnerable, overlooked populations that often do not have a voice. I can think of many occasions where I have witnessed staff advocating on behalf of clients in order to right a wrong. I have also observed the benefits of having a committee in place that focuses specifically on culture, diversity and inclusion, giving thoughtful consideration to how those issues can impact both clients and staff, as well as programs and policies.

Despite those efforts – and the work of countless other agencies, advocates and community members – the plague of systemic racism remains a shameful reality. Regardless of what transpires in the coming days, weeks and even years, WE will push forward and proceed to work on behalf of those less fortunate, less privileged, and in need.

We share the sadness and grief that is occurring in

our world.

As an agency, we will continue to seek ways to identify and intervene in situations to address social injustices on behalf of those we serve and for those who are a part of our organization. While these acts alone may seem trivial and not enough, I do believe that with continued focus and passion, they do – and will – make a difference. We also recognize that more is needed. Our commitment to seeking understanding will be renewed by these times, and that is where I will find my inspiration and hope.

Those of you who are regular readers of this newsletter will recognize that the appearance and tone of this issue is rather different from the content we typically share. Over the next several pages, you will hear directly from some of our employees. I applaud these individuals for sharing their unique perspectives in order to initiate the hard, but necessary, conversations that must happen. This is a dialogue that we must all engage in – if we are to move forward as a united people.

Just like our responses to the uncertainty of the COVID-19 crisis, WE will sustain ourselves and move forward during hard times by building hope out of simple acts of kindness and compassion, while also celebrating our differences, embracing our similarities, and respecting the individual dignity of those we serve and those we serve beside.

Our world is being transformed, and NRVCS has a place in it. I have hope, and I hope you do, too.



Photo - Ross Wilsie/NRVCS

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Pritchett'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

James Pritchett, LCSW  
NRVCS Executive Director

# Brooke M. Carroll

NRVCS Emergency Services Clinician -  
Jail Diversion Program



**Brooke Carroll with her four-month-old daughter, Sparrow (Submitted Photo)**

It is no secret that the events of recent weeks have caused many to consider their stance on various racial and political issues to see how they can be a better human, friend, loved one, and service provider. As well, many have chosen to humbly take a backseat and listen to the hurting around them to better educate themselves and confront their own biases as they see the events of racial injustice and police brutality. All while navigating an unprecedented pandemic.

As helping professionals to a vulnerable group of people living in the New River Valley and beyond we must serve, educate, and provide support. Before engaging in such a way we must address our own biases and ensure that we are being advocates for all people, especially those who are most marginalized.

As a woman of color, I would be remiss to point out that the current issues of racism and police brutality are nothing new to the black community. These events have long been something that black parents and caregivers have educated their children on as they prepare to leave their homes daily. Teaching their children that no matter how amazing and beautiful they are there will still be people in this world who will judge them or hate them based solely on the color of their skin.

As a new mother, I look at my daughter and I see her as beautiful and cherished and it breaks my heart to think just as my parents looked at me, she will be judged by the color of her skin. Nelson Mandela said it best, *“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate.”*


Therefore, if nothing else spurs you to want change, please let

us consider those who learn from us and this includes our loved ones and clients. We must do better. We can start by calling out injustices as we see them. By stating Black lives, voices, stories, and trauma matter and understand stating so doesn't discredit any other people, or make you anti-white or anti-police. But instead, it makes you anti-hate and anti-racist.

With this I implore you to challenge your own biases this includes but is not limited to accepting that you may have made racist statements and other micro-aggressions. Please humble yourself to hear of the moments where you have judged another because of the color of their skin. Surround yourself with people who don't look like you and who have different values. In doing so we can challenge one another and spur each other on to gain awareness and greater education.

No matter our intention we will have moments of ignorance and bias where our speech reflects that. Listen to your Black friends and loved ones. Hear their stories and become an ally by using your privilege to help raise awareness and fight the injustices brought against them. For some this will look like participating in a protest, giving financially to a worthy cause, but regardless it must always begin with self-examination and humbling to hear where we have been the oppressor.

As an agency, my hope is we will focus on growth and exposure to continue to educate ourselves and enhance our positions as allies and eradicate hate in the New River Valley and to the ends of our reach.



this  
is my happy place.

## Bently Wood

NRVCS Peer Recovery Specialist

Submitted Photo

**W**hen I was asked to share my perspective and experience about what is going on locally and globally in our world today, I began to ponder my past. I have reflected upon my life experiences and some defining moments and events come to mind.

I grew up in the Christiansburg area. I remember as a small child being in a department store in downtown Christiansburg where there were two water fountains and three bathrooms. I vividly remember seeing signs “whites only” and “colored”. I remember being called to the principal’s office and asked why I was playing with the black kids on the playground. That is the moment in time I realize I was taught of difference. I did not understand in that moment what had been done.

I was sheltered from knowledge and understanding of privilege for most of my life. Growing up in poverty with higher education not an option. I was limited in knowledge. A fear of rejection, isolation and complete denial of who I was created a belief that I had no privilege.

It was not until I returned to New River Community College in 2010 and took an Introduction to Sociology class that I learned that white privilege existed. I had reached a low point in my life during the summer of 2008 and wanted to die. Fortunately, the

image of my daughters being told of my death changed my decision. During this time, with the help of a therapist I accepted that I was a gay man. This began a 2-year process of accepting who I was and finding the courage to separate from my wife of 22 years.

2010 began a process of change in my life that continues today. April 29, 2016 was the end of my old life and the beginning of my living. My life has been one constant process of change since that day.

My work provides me an opportunity to share the experiences of my past in ways to help others. I was fortunate enough to hear Maya Angelo speak many years ago. She writes in her poem, *Rainbow in the Cloud*, “be a rainbow in someone else’s cloud. I have had a lot of clouds, but I have had so many rainbows.”

All of these memories and experiences bring me back to my past. A past that has been full of clouds and rainbows.

It is recent events that are a reminder of my privilege. I have an opportunity to stand up for and advocate for the changes that will begin to bring equity. To match my actions with my words. To challenge the use of division and hate. To ask how I can help when I am unsure.

I am grateful to be a part of an organization that allows space and time for this conversation. In her poem I am Human, Ms. Angelou writes, “*What I pray for is humility, to know there is something greater than I*”.

This brings me hope.

# Daniel Parker

NRVCS Central Scheduling Office Assistant -  
REACH program/Wadsworth

**T**oday, things are changing faster than we can keep up with. New challenges arise and we as individuals have had to learn and adapt to these situations. As we all know, 2020 has been a trying year so far and it's only just the middle of the year. We have been through so much, but we have learned to make adjustments in the efforts of continuing on with the future.

I cannot speak for everyone, but I know that I have had to make a few adjustments on how I deal with issues in certain situations due to what is going on in the world, but I have always done that throughout my life.

Growing up, I moved around a lot and some places were not as friendly to individuals of my standing. In today's time, people are voicing how they feel and how to provide a better union between everyone. I feel that everyone should be able to express themselves in a safe and peaceful manner without being dismissed or overlooked by someone that doesn't share the same opinions.

As an employee of NRVCS, I believe that we need to be open-minded not only to the clients that we serve, but the individuals that help serve them. In my time with NRVCS, I have met individuals from all walks of life and hearing their stories have saddened me. People who came from nothing, have no family, and have no type of support whatsoever, have worked hard to try to get themselves in a better situation than what they grow up in.

*“ I feel that everyone should be able to express themselves in a safe and peaceful manner without being dismissed or overlooked by someone that doesn't share the same opinions. ”*

I feel as if I can relate to some of these individuals because I also come from nothing. My mother raised three children on her own without help from anyone and she tried to provide us with everything we needed, when we needed it.

Forwarding to today, I am a senior at Radford University trying to obtain my Bachelor's in Psychology. This has been very rough on me because I have had to pay for school out of my own pocket. For a time, I gave up on school because I no longer could afford it. It took me 4 years to raise enough money in order for me to return to school and fight to finish my degree. I will be the first person in my immediate family to earn a degree so I feel the pressure every day coming down on me to succeed.

NRVCS does well in educating employees about what diversity means and how to do better with it. I believe individuals that have lived a stressful life should continue to inform their peers in order to expand the minds of those around them. We will be able to understand one another on a deeper level, as well as have a sense of how they came to be in the place where they are now.

Sometimes listening to people who have had to struggle in life and what they have endured enlightens one to see things from a different perspective that they never knew themselves.

Now I ask you this simple question: *What will you do to make a difference?*



Submitted Photo



Leroy Robinson with his children (Submitted Photo)

# Leroy Robinson

Supervisor - 401 Peer Center

*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.*  
- Romans 12:18

When I first saw the video of George Floyd gasping for air, I was upset that a man was being killed - not because it was a cop killing a black man, but just seeing a human being die like that was just wrong - no matter what color the victim or the perpetrator. But I knew where it was headed.

In our modern-day culture, it's all about division. I know the tactics of the enemy - if we remain divided, we continually regress, without any forward motion toward equality or progress toward social justice.

Today I choose not to be divided or offended, but to be at peace with all men. I have acceptance of myself and the world around me - because of my Christian faith, I believe - and my worldview is rooted in understanding and compassion for all.

To see so many people out there - of all colors - striving for justice, it cannot fail to inspire hope that one day we will reach a place where we do not see color. If it be possible.

But know this: when you speak out about my exclusion, you will share in my exclusion. Read that sentence again then ask yourself if you are willing to pay the price. No matter who the enemy is, we can refuse to be divided. If it be possible.

But there is a tipping point when it is a bridge too far and enough is enough, and action - while it must always bow deferentially to peace - action must step in nonetheless.

My director, the other day, asked me what I thought NRVCS could do to further the cause of social justice.

I remember when I first came to NRVCS as a client. They didn't make me feel insignificant or unworthy - not because of my skin color, my criminal charges, and my wheelchair. They believed every human being has the right to recover from whatever afflicts them - trauma, hardship, hurt, mistakes. They welcomed me in just as I was. They gave me a career, they gave me a family, they gave me a purpose.

How to answer my supervisor's question? I'm still trying to arrive at an answer for him, and I won't be able to arrive at it alone. It is a journey I believe we will embark upon together.

None of the right answers are simple ones.

My first thought was that we've already started. I thought about how we accept everyone through our doors, no matter the color of their skin, their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their faith, their economic situation, their political affiliation. Here, at this place, none of it matters as long as you desire help.

This attitude of inclusiveness is where we start. We begin this journey as a city on a hill. That's where we start, being an example to the communities around us. That's where hope lives: starting where we are and finding our way forward into a better day.

If it be possible.

We choose to walk in love. We choose to be at peace with all men. We change the world around us, one person at a time. We stand in unity with the dispossessed and the outcast. We stand united. We strive to be better...as much as lieth in us.

# Examining mental health in the Black community

By Mike Wade / NRVCS  
mwade@nrvc.org

While the prevalence of mental illness among African Americans may be in line with that of the general population, members of the Black community face a number of unique challenges when it comes to addressing their own mental health needs.

Current events have forced our nation to re-examine the long-standing systemic racism and bigotry that have been issues in our society for centuries. Even our foundational systems of care have not been exempt from this ugly and painful part of our history. Sadly, there is ample evidence to prove that this is also still very much a fact of our world today.

“I think we’re seeing a lot of different emotions that are being displayed - from anger to rage to feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and depression,” notes Dana L. Cunningham, Ph.D., who serves as Vice-President of Community Outreach and Engagement for Black Mental Wellness, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that promotes access to information and resources about mental and behavioral health wellness for the Black community.

“For so many Black people, we’ve experienced and expressed how frustrated we’ve been for years over the way particularly Black people and people of color have been treated police and the larger society with issues related to discrimination and injustice,” Cunningham adds. “Often times, those voices have not been heard or responded to in a way that was always very helpful or welcoming.”

According to a recent publication from Mental Health America, racial trauma, or race-based traumatic stress (RBTS), refers to the mental and emotional injury cause dby encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism and hate crimes.

*“For many people of color, when they do go to a mental health professional, they want to feel understood, they want to feel that their experiences are valued, and they want to feel respected.”*

**- Dr. Dana L. Cunningham**

“If they [Black or people of color] experience consistent discrimination, prejudice, threats, shame...witnessing harm come to another person of color because of their race, or think they may get humiliated or denigrated because of their race - that can illicit traumatic responses and feelings in someone,” says Cunningham. “And we think about the emotional impact of that - and in many cases, it’s not just one time - we often experience multiple micro aggressions and those experiences can result in feelings of fear and anxiety, confusion, guilt or blame.”

“So, it definitely takes an emotional and often physical toll on people in the Black community,” she adds.

That toll could be a contributing factor to a recent increase in suicide rates among the Black community - particularly among young people. Cunningham, who has spent much of her career

working with children, points to bullying on social media and a growing number of Black youth who identify as LGBTQ.

“We have a generation of young Black boys and girls who are really struggling emotionally,” says Cunningham.

She adds that many Black youth are also impacted by the incarceration of a parent or loved one. While Black people make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, they represent 40% of the nation’s prison population (U.S. Bureau of Justice - 2018).



**Dr. Dana L. Cunningham**  
Photo - blackmentalwellness.com

Cunningham acknowledges that many members of the Black community are reluctant to seek help because of cultural stigma toward mental illness, as well as a lack of information about available resources and also distrust of authority.

A related barrier to mental health treatment for the Black community, according to Cunningham, is a lack of culturally-competent service providers.

“For many people of color, when they do go to a mental health professional, they want to feel understood, they want to feel that their experiences are valued, and they want to feel respected,” she adds. “They want to feel like the interventions and suggestions that are being provided to them resonate with their culture and their experience.”

One challenge to that level of care is the limited amount of diversity among providers. In fact, according to the American Psychological Association, only 4% of psychologists in the U.S. workforce identified as Black or African-American in 2015.

“It’s one of the disparities related to education,” states Cunningham. “To become a mental health professional, you have to go to graduate school - so there’s issues with access and barriers related to the whole educational experience.”

She goes on to say that she and her colleagues at Black Mental Wellness are addressing this issue by trying to increase exposure to other Black mental health professionals.

“We want young children to see someone that looks like them so they know it’s possible, it’s feasible to become a licensed mental health professional.”

So, what can individuals who aren’t Black or identify as a person of color do to improve racial relations moving forward? Cunningham offers a simple suggestion - listen and learn.

“One thing is just taking time to understand what the issues are, getting some understanding about the history of systemic racism and white supremacy in the country,” she says. “...taking some time to learn and get invested in what’s happening in our communities and advocating for change at multiple levels.” “I’m definitely very encouraged by a lot of the action that has taken place more recently and the additional conversations that have taken place regarding racism and police injustice,” states Cunningham. “...It seems like there’s some momentum related to those issues going forward but certainly we have a long way to go and have a lot of work to do.”

# HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE FOR BLACKS IN THE UNITED STATES

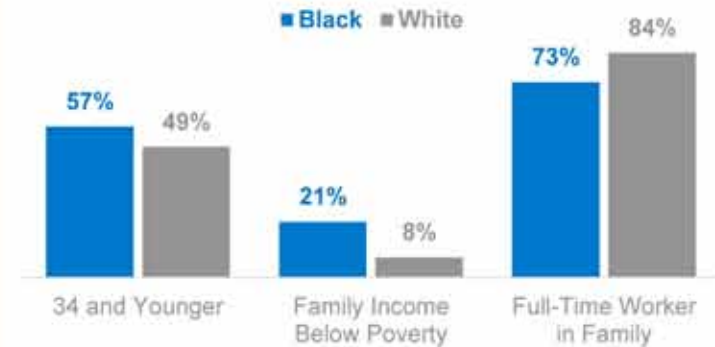
**2017** Nearly **40 million** people living in the U.S. are Black, making up 1 in 8 of the population.

Blacks are projected to account for about **55 million** people living in the U.S. by 2060. **2060**

**Blacks make up a greater share of the population in the South, where most states have not expanded Medicaid.**  
SHARE OF TOTAL POPULATION THAT IS BLACK BY STATE, 2017



**Nonelderly Blacks are younger, more likely to be poor, and less likely to have a full-time worker in the family compared to Whites.**



**There have been large improvements in some health measures for Blacks, but they still fare worse than Whites.**

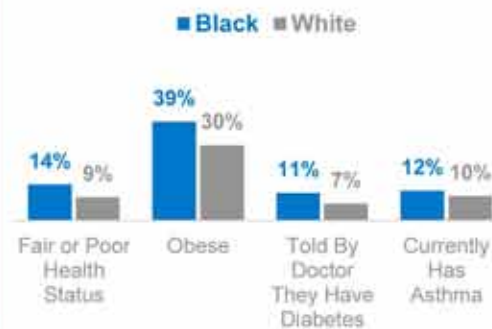
HIV Diagnosis Rate per 100,000 among Teens & Adults, 2008-2016



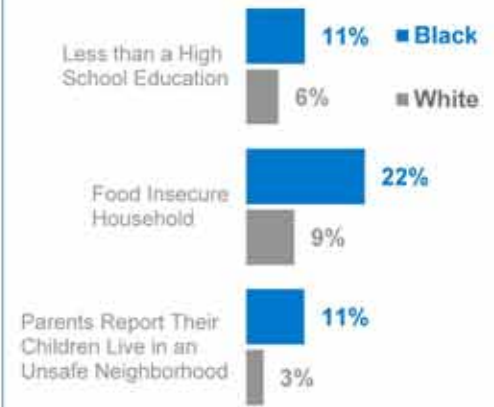
Birth Rate per 1,000 among Teen Girls Ages 15-19, 1997-2017



**Nonelderly Black adults also face disparities in other health measures compared to their White counterparts.**  
HEALTH STATUS & SELECTED HEALTH CONDITIONS AMONG NONELDERLY ADULTS



**Blacks are more likely to face other challenges that affect health and access to care.**

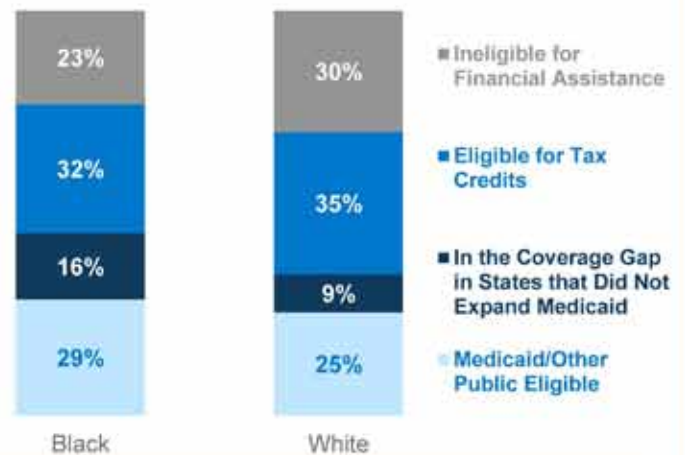


**The uninsured rate for Blacks declined after the ACA, but they still are more likely than Whites to be uninsured.**

UNINSURED RATE AMONG NONELDERLY INDIVIDUALS, 2013-2017



**Uninsured Blacks are significantly more likely to fall into the coverage gap than Whites, earning too much for Medicaid but not enough for tax credits.**



Source: Original source information and data are available at: <https://kff.org/infographic/health-and-health-care-in-the-u-s-by-race-and-ethnicity>.

kff.org / Email Alerts: kff.org/email / facebook.com/KaiserFamilyFoundation / twitter.com/KaiserFamFound

Filling the need for trusted information on national health issues, the Kaiser Family Foundation is a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco, California.



# Pulaski coalition receives grant to support LGBTQ youth

**PULASKI** - According to a national study on LGBTQ youth mental health conducted by The Trevor Project in 2019, 71% of youth participating in the study reported feeling sad or hopeless for at least two weeks in the past year - and 39% indicated that they had 'seriously considered' attempting suicide in the past twelve months.

After being made aware of the struggles of some local LGBTQ youth by a clinician with NRVCS earlier this year, officials with the Pulaski Community Partners Coalition (PCPC) wrote a proposal for a behavioral health mini-grant through the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS). PCPC was later awarded a grant of approximately \$2,700 to help educate and support families of youth who identify as LGBTQ.

"We learned that there were a growing number of young people in the Pulaski County community who were having a very difficult time and experiencing a variety of mental health issues because they were not being accepted by their own families," explains Mike Wade, Coordinator of Community Wellness and Outreach at NRVCS and a member of PCPC. "Around that same time, we were informed of the grant opportunity through DBHDS, so the timing couldn't have been better."

Wade says the funds made it possible for PCPC to purchase five (5) sets of books that had been recommended by Emil Morris, an Outreach Specialist at the Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley who also identifies as non-binary. The books, which are geared toward parents of children who are changing/questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, have been donated to the public library branches in both Pulaski and Dublin, the NRVCS Pulaski Clinic, the Women's Resource Center, and a fifth set is being shared by local faith leaders.

A portion of the grant funds will also be used to design and produce a variety of print resources to help generate greater understanding and support of LGBTQ youth. Wade says those items will be made available to local service agencies and supportive or-



**SUGGESTED RESOURCES:** Using funds from the behavioral health equity mini-grant provided by the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, the Pulaski Community Partners Coalition (PCPC) purchased five sets of recommended books to help educate and support families of LGBTQ youth. The books have been distributed to access points throughout the community. (Photo - M. Wade/NRVCS)

ganizations and businesses.

The grant has also made it possible for PCPC to establish a safe space for local LGBTQ youth to connect virtually. Wade notes that the original grant proposal called for a one-time focus group with youth, which took place via Zoom on July 29. Participating teens received a \$15.00 Subway gift card for their time.

"The teens participating in that conversation were very open about some of their struggles and most of them acknowledged that they found it difficult to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity in their homes," adds Wade. "When you combine that with the fact that they've all basically been confined to their homes for the last five months, it's pretty obvious that they need more opportunities to connect with their peers."

With this in mind, Wade says PCPC plans to begin offering a monthly Zoom for interested teens - an idea that youth from the focus group readily supported.

"We're opening the monthly conversation to teens throughout the New River Valley who identify as LGBTQ," explains Wade. "Our first time together included a structured set of questions for the purposes of the focus group but the flow and feel of our future meetings will really be determined by the teens involved."

The next virtual meeting for New River Valley LGBTQ teens will take place on Wednesday, August 26 and is open to teens ages 13 and up. For more information or to sign up, email Mike Wade at [mwade@nrvc.org](mailto:mwade@nrvc.org).

Finally, Wade points out that the fourth activity under the grant will be a public awareness event during Domestic Violence Awareness Month (October). Details have yet to be announced, but the event will focus on violence toward individuals who identify as LGBTQ. Community members interested in helping plan this event, or to learn more, should contact Wade.



**COMMUNITY PARTNERS:** PCPC donated one set of LGBTQ-themed books to the Women's Resource Center (WRC) of the New River Valley. WRC staff pictured with the books are (from left) Emil Morris, Executive Director Laura Beth Weaver, and Stephanie Bryson. WRC staff are active members of PCPC, as well as the four other community coalitions in the New River Valley. (Photo - M. Wade/NRVCS)



PROTECT YOURSELF. PROTECT OTHERS. PLEASE WEAR A MASK.



# Be committed. Be well.

## COMMUNITY WELLNESS COMMITMENT

NRVCS is proud to be a collaborative partner in the New River Valley Public Health Task Force. We are committed to supporting the overall health of our community and share in the responsibility of providing residents with effective guidance regarding COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.



### As members of the community, we pledge to care for the health and well-being of others by personally adopting our Community Wellness Commitment:

- **We will** affirm our commitment to the safety, health, and well-being of our campuses and local communities.
- **We will** affirm that we will support the mental well-being of all community members.
- **We will** wear face coverings/masks in public areas.
- **We will** practice physical distancing by maintaining at least 6 feet of distance from others.
- **We will** practice good hygiene, including frequent handwashing and covering coughs or sneezes.
- **We will** stay home and avoid public spaces when not feeling well.
- **We will** contact our health care provider or an urgent care facility if we believe we are sick or have been exposed to the coronavirus.
- **We will** support but avoid contact with those who are sick.
- **We will** follow public health guidelines and medical recommendations to be tested and self-isolate as necessary.
- **We will** make a list of all others with whom we have had close contact, if necessary, to aid in contact-tracing efforts.



THE BLACKSBURG PARTNERSHIP



[vt.edu/ready/well](http://vt.edu/ready/well)  
[nrroadtowellness.com](http://nrroadtowellness.com)

FALL 2020

# New River Valley Drug/Recovery Court Program Update

Data as of 7/30/2020

## **Pulaski County**

Total: 57 since December 2014  
Graduates: 16  
Active: 20  
Terminated/Other: 21

## **Giles County**

Total: 17 since March 2016  
Graduates: 9  
Active: 6  
Terminated/Other: 2

## **Floyd County**

Total: 30 since March 2016  
Graduates: 4  
Active: 18  
Terminated/Other: 8

## **Montgomery County**

Total: 37 since May 2017  
Graduates: 8  
Active: 19  
Terminated/Other: 10

## **Radford City**

Total: 1 since March 2020

## **New River Valley**

Total: 142 since December 2014  
Graduates: 37  
Active: 64  
Terminated/Other: 41



**LATEST GRADUATE:** On July 20, Kaylin McGuire was recognized as the latest graduate of the Giles County Recovery Court program. Kaylin is pictured here with the Honorable H. Lee Harrell, presiding judge over the program. Congratulations to Kaylin on this wonderful accomplishment! (Photo - Lori Trail/NRVCS)

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