CHFS Community
Commissioner Wendy Morris
Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities (DBHDID)
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Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It was traumatic just seeing that and just being in there. We know from a behavioral health perspective, right? We're going to see a need to make sure that we're providing the behavioral health support that we can both to the folks that work for us and the folks we work with.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah.

Julianne Hatton:
Hello and welcome to CHFS Community, a podcast about health and wellbeing for CHFS employees across the commonwealth, hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander, broadcasting from Frankfort, Kentucky.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Hello, CHFS, this is Eric Friedlander, your Secretary. Today I have with me, Wendy Morris, commissioner of the longest name of a department in state government, the Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities. What some of you may not know is that I'm the person that gave it that unfortunate name, and for that I'm sorry. Hi, Wendy.

Wendy Morris:
Hi. How are you today?

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I am fine, I'm fine. So you have this really interesting background that I don't think everybody knows. So you are not originally from Kentucky.

Wendy Morris:
I'm not.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
You are originally from.
Wendy Morris:
Well, I was born in Michigan and moved to Upstate New York at the tender age of four and spent most of my childhood and formative years in Upstate New York in the Finger Lakes region, specifically. A beautiful area. If you've not been there, you really need to visit.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It is. It's gorgeous, it's so nice. My wife was a girl scout camp director, a little down from there, more in the water gap area, but it is so pretty there.

Wendy Morris:
It really is. My father worked for the state park system, and so we not only lived in a state park, but would regularly accompany him when he did his work and go to all the various state parks. So yeah, it's a really special area.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It is, it is. That sounds like so much fun. So you got to grow up at state parks.

Wendy Morris:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So within that area, you went to lovely schools and you went to college where?

Wendy Morris:
State University of New York College at Brockport, which is just south of Rochester. So the far Western part of the state.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Yeah, I'm familiar. SUNY is a good set of schools.

Wendy Morris:
It is. Yeah.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Then how did you find your way to Kentucky?

Wendy Morris:
Well, I have some family history in Kentucky. So my granddaddy was raised in Summer Shade, which is a good bit west of Somerset. People always think, I don't know the name of the town he grew up in, but I do. Summer Shade. And so the Homestead is still there and he used to tell a lot of stories. And when I was in high school, the family took my grandmother's remains. She
had passed away when I was about a year old, buried her there at the Old Homestead. And I wasn't able to go on the trip. I was traveling, actually had the opportunity to travel abroad when I was in high school for a summer. Everybody talked about it for years.

Wendy Morris:
So when I graduated from college, I said, I'm going to go explore my family history. I want to go to Summer Shade. I want to see Berea College where my grandfather went to high school. I want to visit some of the relatives that live in Garrett and Pikeville. So I had some family in Eastern Kentucky. And so when I graduated college, that's exactly what I did. I kind of went to do that exploration, accepted a job with Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) was going to stay a year, ended up meeting my then husband, about 10 months in, we were married about a year later. And so I was there in Eastern Kentucky with him for about 25 plus years.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. You have some really fond memories of Eastern Kentucky,

Wendy Morris:
Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Being there and being a part of community, right?

Wendy Morris:
Yes, absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Folks got you into a lot of volunteerism.

Wendy Morris:
I did a lot of volunteer work, worked with just various organizations. Community Ministries was one of the one that I spent a lot of time with the Foundation for Appalachia. I was involved with some arts coalitions. I worked for the rape crisis center on the board, lots of stuff. I was always very busy.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Where were you mainly when you were living there?

Wendy Morris:
We lived in Perry County. So we lived in the county outside of Hazard. So I worked on the Hazard campus.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So you were with Hazard ARH, right?

Wendy Morris:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Wendy Morris:
In various capacities.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
With a long career at Hazard ARH. You actually ended up working with the Cabinet through the psychiatric hospital side of that. Right?

Wendy Morris:
I did. My last seven years with ARH were running the state-designated psychiatric hospital there, which is in Hazard.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah, right. Then I came to work for the state. I remember when that happened.

Wendy Morris:
Yes. 2013.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Yeah. We were very happy to get you. Very excited that she decided to come to work in the state side. So that means you have this passion for public health. How did that come about?

Wendy Morris:
Yeah. Well, I tell you, my passion for public health really happened when I was doing my undergraduate studies there at SUNY Brockport. We had a whole rotation that had to do with public health. And I was really intrigued in contrast to doing a patient assessment where you may take vital signs and draw labs and listen to lung sounds. There was actually a way to assess a community. It’s health, right? So looking at things like what services are available, is there a hospital, are there grocery stores, is there pharmacy, are there parks and recreational opportunities? Do a drive through, what’s the condition of say the store fronts, the roads, the sidewalks? Those sorts of things. What are the vital statistics? What’s the morbidity and mortality, infant death rate? Those types of things. So I just found that really intriguing. So
when I would come home during the summer from college, I would work as a home health aide.

Wendy Morris:
And that was another, really, tie to that public health, because you really saw how a person's environment that they lived in, what was their air quality and what were the trip hazards. And just that whole environmental piece was really exciting. And so I pursued my master's is in public health nursing. And then I got to work with our local health department and work with our epidemiologist and go look at sewers and all kinds of stuff. But honestly, that work, it really ties with what I do now. And I really been able to think to marry those experiences with the wealth of experience I have in behavioral health. And I think having both of those in my background has really helped me be successful here at the Cabinet, because really what I do now is I'm over the public behavioral health, safety net. Right? And so I use all those skills in the work I do.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Absolutely. And within public health, we talk about, or it is talked about that what's the greatest thing that happened in public health. And as you said, it's sewers. I mean, it really-

Wendy Morris:
It's a pretty big thing.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It's a big thing. And I don't know what the equivalent is for behavioral health and we're talking about stigma and all of those kinds of things, but it is like, how do we make sure that we're living in healthy communities from a behavioral health perspective? I don't know what that infrastructure is.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah. Well, I just talked about some of those things, but there's a lot to it. I think the environment that we live in has a lot to do with our mental health. Right? Is it aesthetically pleasing other opportunities for me to have physical outlets? Do I have access to the care I need and the food I need and the housing I need? All those. We talk about social determinants of health.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah, it's all the same.

Wendy Morris:
Usually people are talking about that from a physical health perspective, but all of those say social determinants really impact your mental health as well. And your mental health impacts
your physical health and your physical health impacts your mental health. It's very much connected.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Exactly. And we talk about in the Cabinet, also some of the resilience things that we're talking about and how that relates to trauma, and of course, trauma is physical and mental. It is both. It's always mind and body. Right?

Wendy Morris:
That's right. You really cannot separate them.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
You cannot. Very difficult. I think Henry the VIII did that and it doesn't work out very well.

Wendy Morris:
Oh, dear.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So you set up some interesting programs at ARH and so you have a unique perspective on what kind of the private side, how we partner with the private side as we are public sector. Right?

Wendy Morris:
Right. And one of the things I did while I was there, I actually started a psychiatric home care program. I worked with a division of home care for a period of time. And that was really interesting. And I was able to do that for the entire organization. So at that time, ARH had a presence in three states, they were in 10 locations, home health agencies and all of those locations. And I was able to develop the policies and procedures. I was able to develop the forms that we used, educational materials, trained all the nurses in things like crisis intervention and therapeutic communication in some things. And then that program did really well in several areas. It really grew quite a bit and was a great service. Of course, home health takes care of people are home bound for whatever reason. And I actually had one of the nurses had to be off for several weeks for some medical procedures.

Wendy Morris:
And so I covered her county for about a month, which was so much fun. So I not only got to go some of the nurses for supervision, but do the hands-on care for a period of time. And so again, a lot of it was counseling and education, but we also would give long-term acting injectables. We would do blood draws for those medications to make sure they weren't having adverse side effects or to make sure that they had a therapeutic level, those types of things. But we would see the whole realm, psychosis, bipolar, depression, anxiety, dementia. Did a lot with that too, but it was a great program. And like you said, mind and body, there's always some element of
that with home health that work happens, even if there's not a specific psychiatric home care program.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, and in Eastern Kentucky and in many places in Kentucky, we talk about one of the major challenges being transportation.

Wendy Morris:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So having an innovative program about going into somebody's home with some behavioral health services was quite innovative, right?

Wendy Morris:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Now we've gone through COVID.

Wendy Morris:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right? And we've changed a lot of how we do things. Right now, we do a lot of tele-behavioral health. Is that something you feel has helped or will help?

Wendy Morris:
The telehealth? Oh, yes. It's kind of interesting because I'm of a certain age where I was very resistant to things like cell phones and the internet, I'm like, "I don't know about all that." And I have children who are ... I have a teenager and a young adult daughter who stay on their phones and that's how they like to get their services. If they can take their classes online, if they can see their doctor online, if they can engage in activities with their friends online. And so I wasn't sure it would work in behavioral health, but it actually works beautifully. And we've been using telehealth in mental health actually for a long time, because we would do some of our jail triage work and some other things where it wasn't easy to get into places. So some of the folks we served were already accustomed to it. It feels safer to some people, transportation again, can be a big barrier. So it allows ... And childcare and any multitude of things that make it difficult for people to come in for their appointment. There are people who really prefer the in person.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, absolutely.

Wendy Morris:
They want that time and closeness, the eye contact. And some of those things that are a little bit more difficult with telehealth, but it's really changing how we're able to do business and how many people we can reach.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And really, I think COVID pushed us forward like 20 years.

Wendy Morris:
It did.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah.

Wendy Morris:
Because things we've been wanting to for a long time, we were suddenly compelled to do, which was really exciting. And so people and institutions that had been resistant to it had to give it, a whirl. I think that we really knew it worked on the outpatient side. Like I said, we'd been doing it dabbling in that for quite some time. But what we learned is it also can work on the inpatient side because we could have staff who maybe were ill or had been exposed and were quarantining. They could still participate in treatment team meetings. They could still interact with patients on the inpatient side. It allowed us to maybe bring in some locals who weren't willing to come in, but we were willing to do some telehealth interaction. And I had dabbled without a little bit at ARH as well when we were down on psychiatrists. So it's been really good.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. And so it's building on those things that we learned that work and hopefully making things better and acknowledging that we learn along the way.

Wendy Morris:
Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. We've got to, hopefully.

Wendy Morris:
Yes.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That's what we're supposed to do. So speaking of COVID and disasters, you and I took a trip to Eastern Kentucky together, and I'm so happy you were able to come with me because I think it brought back ... You were able to give perspective on what you were seeing and what we were experiencing. We met with ARH, we met with local health departments and we met with DCBS workers. We met with community workers. We went to DRCs and I think it was, I hope for you, as it was, for me, it was being able to talk about scale is so difficult. It was like the tornadoes in Western Kentucky, but even more so.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I mean, you knew places that we were passing by.

Wendy Morris:
I did. I lived in Eastern Kentucky for a very long time. Like I said, going on 30 years, I'd been there through floods. I'd been there when Hazard downtown... Hazard had been flooded and had a lot of water on my own property. And some other things, nothing like what we saw when we were there, it was quite overwhelming.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Wendy Morris:
We were there 30 days post flood. So it's almost unimaginable what it had looked like in the 30 days building up. And of course you see pictures, it's not the same. And everybody tells you that. Everybody says, "You can't imagine it unless you go there." And you know that when we drove the back road between Hindman and Jackson, as it was suggested that we do, that's when we really got to see just how much is left to do just that the impact. That was huge.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
The volume of water and the speed of the water and the depth of the water and how quickly all of that must happen. It was just looking up in a tree, a couple of stories and seeing a roof somewhere.

Wendy Morris:
Right. All those trees down. And you would keep saying, "The car would be underwater here too."

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah.
Wendy Morris:
Because you could see the water level where it was from the side of the road, not the side where the Creek was, but on the other side. And so that was a lot. And the debris, like you said, way up in the trees, but also the way it was pinned against fences and underneath bridges, the bridges that were still there. So many, we saw past so many homes that still had their private bridges out. We passed homes where people had tents set up in their front yard. That was a lot. And you said we passed places that I knew. And I was very familiar with that road. We passed several places that I pointed out to you that I knew. The one that I think impacted me the most and that I've talked about the most since that trip was the Holiday Farm.

Wendy Morris:
Anybody very familiar with Eastern Kentucky has probably heard of it, especially if you're from Perry or surrounding counties because they have this huge event at the fall, goes on for several days. And we would take our kids every year and they had a big pumpkin patch, you could pick pumpkins, and purchase pumpkins. Then they would set up tables for the kids so they could paint them. They sold refreshments. There was a corn maze. There're huge barn full of goats and bunnies and any number of animals' chickens and pigs and lambs. And they had cows and the whole thing. And when we drove by that barn, you could tell. Rushed with water, rushed with mud and my heart. I remember you asked if I was okay, because I was driving. My heart just kind of broke because you knew, you knew that if there were animals in that barn, they didn't survive.

Wendy Morris:
We've talked a lot about the destruction to the human lives, to people losing their things and their belongings. So it was the memory, all those memories from having the family there. But then it's also thinking about those animals. And when we got to Jackson, I was able to confirm with somebody there that in fact all those animals were lost. They were able to get the cows to higher ground, but they just didn't have the time to save those other animals. And so that gives you thinking about other pets and things. How many stories did we hear about people had no idea because it was at night until the water was coming in. And the stories about the fire station that couldn't get out when this call started coming for help, they were trapped.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I met folks who were impacted, the DCBS worker and where were we?

Wendy Morris:
That was in Hindman.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That was in Hindman. Right. And the fire truck was washed under the bridge, probably more of a display at that point, but whose family was watching their possessions kind of wash away, and still had folks missing at that point, just really, really heartbreaking. But I knew early on, when
you could tell that there were more workers impacted, there were more offices impacted than what happened in Western Kentucky. I'm like, "Oh, this is going to be a much bigger event." And it was, and in many ways, when we're driving that road, it's like, "Wow, the first responders were amazing."

Wendy Morris:
We passed what? Five or six teams?

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah.

Wendy Morris:
30 days out five or six teams on that one road that were working to restore power lines and removing debris.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. You could tell the transportation department; Horray Transportation Department had been doing a great job of clearing roads and getting as much out as possible. It was really amazing, heartening, and it's disheartening in this, that we're all trying to work on recovery, which we should be, which we should be. And I think we do, we now know as you were talking, right? It was traumatic just seeing that and just being in there, we know from a behavioral health perspective, we're going to see a need to make sure that we're providing the behavioral health support that we can both to the folks that work for us and the folks we work with.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah. And we know there's the short term behavioral health consequences and then the long term, right? Because right now, we're moving kind of past that initial shock into a more of a recovery response. But sometimes that's when it hits people even harder because in the beginning you're like, "What of my things can I salvage? Where am I going to sleep tonight? How am I going to get food? Are my friends and neighbors okay?" So you're in this hyper aware state, people feel a community coming together and there's sometimes even a sense of optimism that, "Okay, this is horrible, but we're all coming together. We're going to get this fixed." And then 30 days out, we're still working to do some of that basic stuff. And then what are we now at day 40, 45? So as that time wears on it can be a lot, right? It can be a lot. We know we're still dealing with the aftermath of the tornado in Western Kentucky. That's not done.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
No.
Wendy Morris:
It's not history. Right? People are still recovering, still people who don't have their home. So there can be a lot of stress reactions, emotional instability. People can even early on have some symptoms of depression or anxiety, but long term, they can have post-traumatic stress disorder.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Absolutely.

Wendy Morris:
How many stories did we hear, especially about kids who couldn't sleep at night, people who are reacting to the sound of rain or those types of things.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Someone who was telling us about their four-year-old, who anytime it rained is like he's downtown going to get washed away again. Or when I was in Western Kentucky talking to some folks who like public radio, who said, "Anytime we hear a thunder or lightning, we just."

Wendy Morris:
Get a little nervous.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Get a little nervous.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right?

Wendy Morris:
But as time goes on, people can get this overwhelming sense of hopelessness. Is it ever going to get better? Is life going to get back to normal? Is this repairable? Do I want to continue to live here? That's the other thing we heard a lot, right? Is people were concerned that folks moved away and weren't going to come back because I think we were in Jackson, in Breathitt County when we heard a lot of those comments. And then things like trouble focusing. I know that I've heard anecdotes. They're worried about kids going back to school and isn't too soon, are they really going to be able to focus on their studies when their family is still trying to figure out how to meet some of the basic needs of their family.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. But it's part of what we do. Right?

Wendy Morris:
Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It's provide support and hopefully provide some support. And I know that governor's been really good about both tornado and flood relief funds that I think the Eastern Kentucky fund is over $8 million at this point. So I mean, people are willing to help. And I hope that that is some comfort and balm to folks, how much people wanted to pitch in. And people wanted to help the heck. There were people from Western Kentucky who were still recovering from the tornado who came to Eastern Kentucky to help. I mean, just these stories of resilience, the stories of people just wanting to reach out and help. And I hope that helps people.

Wendy Morris:
I mean, it's bound to, right? It'll help some people more than others that having crisis counselors, along with all the basic services at those disaster response centers, the DRCs have been great. The community mental health centers, public health departments, a lot of people, churches have been going door to door. I get pretty frequent updates from our behavioral health team about what's happening with the disaster response. And this morning they were talking about the collaboration between public health and our community mental health centers making thousands of contacts, they're going out and doing what's called a CASPER survey, which is looking at all of those basic needs and behavioral health needs. And they're getting really favorable response and people are appreciative of that. Sometimes the needs are simple. They said, one gentleman said, "All I need is a new mop." He just needed a mop to kind of start, but other people have a lot more needs.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That being able to respond to that, and hopefully that helps folks. And as you're saying, people being willing to help, finding those folks who care and those things that increase that kind of emotional resilience, those are the kinds of things that I think we're all need to work on.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah. We talk about emotional resilience here a lot, but a person's ability to adapt to stressful situations and to crisis can be really, really difficult. And like I said, at the beginning, they're going to be focusing on their basic needs. What they find is sometimes strategies that worked for them previously, aren't going to work now. So sometimes you have to figure out, "Okay, so how do I cope now? How do I bounce back or heal from this?" And one thing is, people need to give themselves time and each other time and grace to work through that process at the pace that they need to, and people are going to have different internal skills and resources to pull
from than other people. So like I said, really give each other the grace to do that. But some basic things that are super important, one is social support.

Wendy Morris: 
So being able to reach out to family or friends or just other people are making themselves available to you in the community or seeking out social support, going to places like the DRC, where there's people there who will listen and who will provide some comfort and support, spiritual support. In Eastern Kentucky, especially that's a really important tool for a lot of people there. And I know when we were at the DRC in Knox County, they said the churches had taken over some of that distribution. That's really important. Engaging in self-care. And I'm not talking about maybe some of the typical, the bubble bath kind of self-care, right? It can be a lot more to that.

Wendy Morris: 
Physical activities is a really important one. And again, I don't mean going to the gym. Maybe you go out and play with the dog, maybe grab a hula hoop, something that maybe is light and entertaining, but moves your body and get your blood flowing and distracts you for a period of time for what's weighing so heavy on your mind. And then when you can, make some time for gratitude, that was among all the stories were heard too. This is everything I lost. This is what I still have, right? My life, my spouse, whatever it was. And that can be hard to do. But sometimes we have to take a little time to focus on what we're grateful for.

Secretary Eric Friedlander: 
I think that's really important. We've even talked within the Cabinet, even our leadership group, we're all reacting to things differently. We're all reacting to the challenges of responding to disasters, responding to COVID. Maybe the general assembly. Other things that happen within the Cabinet and the challenges of the day to day and that people react differently. And the most important thing to do is realize that, hey, everybody is different, right? And to give each other grace and to have gratitude, to have gratitude, I am grateful for you.

Wendy Morris: 
And I am grateful for you.

Secretary Eric Friedlander: 
That's something that I hope that folks in the Cabinet can hold onto. I mean, what we do, we get to wake up every day and maybe change somebody's life. We get to be grateful for that. Nothing's ever perfect. I think I brought you through the second floor in the public health building. You were stunned at the beauty of the reconstruction.

Wendy Morris: 
Yes.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Opened the door. And you said, "If I'd to opened this door, I would've been sure I was in the wrong place."

Wendy Morris:
Yes, I would've been certain of it.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
All the carpet up and all that stuff.

Wendy Morris:
Definitely construction zone.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah, definitely construction zone.

Wendy Morris:
No floors, no walls.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah. Little things.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Little things. But perhaps we can be grateful for the fact that it's going to be improved. Right? It's going to be better. And those are the things that if we're able to acknowledge that among ourselves and acknowledge that some of the things we're going through are hard and giving each other grace, I think we'll go a long way. Not only here, but in our lives.

Wendy Morris:
Yeah, I agree.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Commissioner Morris, thank you very much. I know that you don't love these kinds of conversations, but you fabulous. So I hope everybody else thinks so too, and will tune in to our next podcast. Thank you, Wendy.
Wendy Morris:
Thank you.

Julianne Hatton:
Thanks for joining us on CHFS Community. Hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander produced by Julianne Hatton. Our Assistant Producer is Beth Fisher. Our Technical Director and Graphic Artist is Lisa Wallace. Watch for the podcast preview in your email so you'll never miss an episode. While you're at it, tell your coworkers about the show. Until next time. Stay healthy, Kentucky.