



STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

**Remarks, as Prepared for Kody Kinsley,  
Deputy Secretary for Behavioral Health and Intellectual  
and Developmental Disabilities**

**Cherry Hospital Black History Month Event**

**February 25, 2020**

Good Morning,

- It is my great honor and privilege to be with you all today.
- I want to thank Secretary Cohen for joining us. I know she loves being here and spending time to acknowledge our past, and share her vision for making North Carolina a better and healthier place for all of us.
- I also want to echo Secretary Cohen's sentiments and thank those that have worked so hard to host this event. It's truly a highlight of the year, and we're so grateful for all the work it takes to put it together.

- Secretary Cohen underscored the challenges that remain in equitable access to health care. Addressing these issues is a top priority for our entire team.
- And core to the work done each and every day here at Cherry Hospital – providing the highest level of care – for everyone – regardless of their race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or national origin.
- Cherry Hospital is a critical part of North Carolina’s health care infrastructure. It is the highest level of care for individuals with the most complex behavioral health needs.
- The skills of the staff here, the nurses, the doctors, the assistants, the social workers, the environmental staff, is second to none. And most of all – the cooks. If you haven’t had a Cherry Cookie! You’re missing out!
- While I am so proud of our team and the work they accomplish. I am particularly proud of their perseverance. Things are not always easy in this work. The road we’ve

been on has had bumps, and rocks, and challenges. But the team of Cherry Hospital has risen above. Has sojourned on. And in the face of so much, since the early days in 1880, Cherry has become the best version of itself. Where excellence in care and equity in access are paramount to all we do. And for as bright as today is, I know tomorrow is even brighter, because of those that humbly serve, every day.

## **Broader**

- Cherry Hospital has been part of a broader narrative of history unfolding in our state and county. And today, and this month in particular, I want to reflect and celebrate the vital role that Black Americans have played in our state and in our country expanding access to health care.
- Black History Month provides us an opportunity to remember our past, including many – too many – painful challenges.

- Black History Month also affords us also the opportunity to highlight successes, progress, and the challenges that have been overcome.
- Black Americans, those we know and those we may not know, have played an monumental role in advancing the cause of individuals with behavioral health needs and intellectual or developmental disabilities.
- Their work has changed our state and our nation's systems of care broadly. They have changed the course of history for all Americans, for the better.
- For example, the services provided today to children with serious mental health needs is in large part due to Willie Leon Monteith Jr. who was the lead plaintiff in the 1979 Willie M. class action lawsuit. Willie was a young boy in the foster care system who kept falling through the cracks. North Carolina's lack of investment in community levels of care had left him behind. And the lawsuit in which he was

the plaintiff would result in unparalleled investment in our child welfare and treatment system.

- Next, and although she lived in Georgia, we cannot overstate the significance of the role Lois Curtis, a black woman played as one of the lead plaintiffs in the Olmstead lawsuit, which resulted in the work we are now undertaking to create services and supports that will support individuals living with disabilities to live in safe, inclusive, and supportive community settings.
- Our Transitions to Community Living Initiative is a priority today of many states because of her courage. Lois refused to be treated less than, simply because she had a mental health and IDD condition.
- And in North Carolina, Thomas S. led the way in the class action lawsuit that sued for the right to receive treatment in his community, near family and friends. Which pushed the state to respect individuals, support choice, and enables everyone to live a meaningful life.

- These three leaders, their struggle, and their actions, remind me of one of my favorite quotes from Secretary of State Colin Powell: “Have a vision. Be demanding.”
- These individuals, along with so many others we honor this month, had a vision and demanded a system, a state, a world, that didn’t push them to the side and label them as “other.”
- **And in the same instant that I think of all they have led us to do, I know, in that exact same instant, that. We. Are. Not. Done.**

## **Bigger**

- We must keep pushing toward a shared vision of a healthier North Carolina that provides unfettered access to treatment for those with mental illnesses, substance use disorders, traumatic brain injuries, and developmental disabilities.
- And just as we see that vision, we must be quick to action.

- We must keep the spirit of Willie, Lois, and Thomas... going even further to assemble all the building blocks that drive health – equitable access to affordable housing, to transportation, to fair employment, to a justice system that is just, and of course, to health care that promotes wellness.
- We all want a world where individuals, their families and their communities truly become healthy and resilient.
- Today. As we honor the black history – which is THE AMERICAN history. All of this makes me think about **belonging**.
- For too long, and still too often today in North Carolina, individuals with mental illnesses, substance use disorders and development disabilities are pushed to the margins and do not feel like they belong.
- Individuals with SUD are pushed out of society because they go to jail instead of treatment. And once they leave

incarceration, they have to check a box so it's hard to get a job again.

- Individuals with behavioral health issues are pushed to the fringe because stigma makes it hard for them to be understood and get care.
- They're pushed out because the current health care delivery system will treat someone every day for their diabetes but never ask about their depression.
- They're pushed out because when family members are sick, they can lose their kids.
- They are pushed out because we have not had the moral capacity and compassionate fortitude to fix these systemic problems that help individuals live a life of self-determined purpose.
- Everything we are doing is about restoring a sense of belonging for people in North Carolina – and not just the people in our public mental health system – but everyone.



- That is what Willie, and Lois, and Thomas have led us to do.
- We must provide behavioral health services in a way that are preventative, thoughtful, equitable and supportive so that folks can truly live, work, and thrive in their communities.
- Thank you and thank you for welcoming me so warmly here today. For those of you who work here at Cherry, thank you for the good and important work you do here every day.
- For our special guests, thank you for coming today to reflect on our history with us.