



Lori Criss
Director,
Ohio Department of
Mental Health &
Addiction Services



Written By: Alan Johnson, Former Reporter for The Columbus Dispatch & Contract Writer for NAMI Ohio

Growing up in Mingo Junction in Appalachian Ohio, Lori Criss recalls having two favorite stories: the Good Samaritan and David and Goliath. One story focused on helping others, while the other dealt with battling giants.

As the new director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Criss said she will rely on those lessons and many others in guiding an agency with a statewide network of care that includes 51 Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Boards, six regional psychiatric hospitals and more than 600 community-based mental health and addiction prevention, treatment and recovery support services provider agencies. The agency has an annual budget of around \$700M and serves hundreds of thousands of Ohioans.

She was appointed to the position by new Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, replacing Dr. Mark Hurst who ran the agency on an interim basis.

Criss is a 27-year veteran of the behavioral health field, having begun her career with the Ohio Commission on Minority Health, followed by 18 years with Amethyst, a program in Columbus focused on family-centered mental health, addiction treatment and housing for women.

Criss went to work in 2012 for The Ohio Council of Behavioral Health & Family Services Providers, a group representing non-profit addiction treatment and

prevention, mental health, and family services providers. She worked to promote prevention, treatment and recovery services for those with mental illness and substance use disorders, to integrate physical and behavioral healthcare, and to create housing opportunities for people with substance use disorders.

Criss earned a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in social work from Ohio State University. She lives in Central Ohio with her husband, Scott, and their daughter.

In an interview with NAMI Ohio, Criss discussed her priorities as head of the state agency.

“I’m excited about the level of attention that Gov. DeWine is giving to make sure that services are available to support people with mental illness and addiction, not just in the adult system, but also from a kids’ system perspective,” she said.

Criss said while Mental Health and Addiction Services is one agency, it encompasses “two very different things” in terms of behavioral health and addition.

“There are some people who have both, but we really need to recognize they are different illnesses,” Criss said. “They have different stigmas. While we’re one department, we can’t think of them the same. It would be like if the American Cancer Society treated lung cancer and liver cancer as if they were the same.”

Criss it’s too early to detail priorities for the state budget, but she wants to emphasize mental health care for youngsters and overall crisis care. She said there are not enough services for either right now.

“We don’t have enough expertise for kids on mental health issues,” she said. “That’s something I’d really like to build out and elevate that work. We also need to be sure we are addressing the social and emotional needs of kids.”

“No family should have a child who needs services and has to drive across the state or go out of state to get them.”

A shortage of crisis care is “an area that is definitely creating pain and suffering,” Criss added. **“We’ve got to do more with crisis care.”**

Criss said her philosophical approach to the new job will be based on a combination of her experience growing up in Appalachian Ohio and in dealing with homeless women and families in Columbus.

“We need to have a plan to respond to their crisis and their pain...That’s something I have to carry with me every day doing this

work. We need a humane and compassionate response to fight the giants of mental illness and addiction.”