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The Interlocal Agreement

Hank Debnam and Cumberland County's Fight to Keep Mental Health Care Local

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Who He Is

Hank Debnam spent close to four decades on two overlapping tracks of public service in Fayetteville: thirty-seven years in the U.S. Army and the North Carolina Army National Guard, and a parallel career running Cumberland County's public mental health system through the years it was dismantled, rebuilt, and folded into a regional authority not of the county's own choosing. He is remembered less for founding something new than for what he refused to let disappear — a walk-in clinic on Bradford Avenue, a detox center on Roxie Avenue, a door that stayed open in a county that was told, twice, to close it.

He earned a Bachelor of Science from Saint Augustine's University in Raleigh and a Master of Public Health from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Public Health, building the civilian credential alongside a military career that would eventually earn him the U.S. Army Meritorious Service Medal. By the time Cumberland County's mental health system faced its hardest year, he had already spent decades learning how institutions survive contraction without abandoning the people who depend on them.

Running the Center on Bradford Avenue

Debnam led the Cumberland County Mental Health Center through the 2000s and into the 2010s, a period the county commissioners' own minutes register in small, specific ways. On December 20, 2010, Commissioner Faircloth recognized him before the full board: the Center had just been honored by the North Carolina Council of Community Mental Health for its Reclaiming Futures Program, an initiative for young people moving through the juvenile justice system with substance use needs. Debnam thanked the board and turned the moment over to Sara Hallock, executive director of CommuniCare, the agency through which the county ran the program — a small gesture, recorded in the public record, that reflects how he ran the department: crediting the partner agencies, not centering himself.

That structure — a county-run center leaning on a network of contracted agencies like CommuniCare — was the system North Carolina's 2011–2012 mental health reform was about to dissolve statewide.

The Interlocal Agreement

North Carolina's push to consolidate local mental health authorities into regional managed care organizations reached Cumberland County on a hard deadline: January 1, 2013. Effective that date, the Cumberland County Mental Health Center would stop directly providing care. In its place, Alliance Behavioral Healthcare — a new, Durham-based authority — would manage mental health, developmental disability, and substance abuse services for more than 195,000 Medicaid-eligible residents across Cumberland, Durham, Wake, and Johnston counties, the largest enrollment of any of the state's eleven regional MCOs.

The dollar figures alone describe a system in freefall: the county's mental health budget fell from \$4.1 million to \$2.8 million for fiscal year 2013 — a cut of more than a third. Sixteen employees were laid off effective June 29, 2012; sixty-seven more followed by the end of that year. The new regional MCO would employ just forty-seven people to cover four counties, some of them transferred over from the old county positions.

Debnam had a choice most department heads in his position did not get to make: whether Cumberland County would fold entirely into the new regional structure, or negotiate something else. He chose an interlocal agreement instead of a straight merger — a legal arrangement that let the county keep a foothold rather than dissolve into Durham's authority outright. Asked why, he was direct about it:

"The reason we did the interlocal agreement (instead of a merger) is because we wanted to make sure we keep a local presence here in Cumberland County." — Hank Debnam, Director, Cumberland County Mental Health Center, 2012

The agreement was not a symbolic win. It kept the psychiatrists and psychologists who had worked for the mental health center employed — transferred to the Cumberland County Health Department rather than laid off — and kept them seeing patients at the same Bradford Avenue location, still taking walk-ins, exactly as before. It preserved county funding for the Roxie Avenue Center, a sixteen-bed detoxification clinic; for the district court's sobriety court; and for a clinic administering Clozaril to residents living with schizophrenia. In a year when the state was actively pulling mental health authority out of local hands, Debnam's negotiated exception is the part of the record worth naming as advocacy: not a protest in the streets, but a fight waged in budget line items and interlocal agreements to keep a vulnerable population from losing access to care during a bureaucratic transition they had no voice in.

Alliance Behavioral Healthcare, Cumberland Site

Debnam did not leave when the county department did. By October 6, 2014, when he again appeared before the Cumberland County Board of Commissioners — this time introducing Alliance staff members Sean Schreiber and Ann Oshel — his title had changed to Alliance Behavioral Healthcare Cumberland Site Director. The system he had spent years running as a county department, he now ran as the local arm of a four-county regional authority: the same continuity of leadership, carried across an institutional line the state had drawn without him.

Recognition and Retirement

In 2011, in the middle of the consolidation fight, the Governor's office awarded Debnam the Order of the Long Leaf Pine — North Carolina's highest civilian honor for service to the state. He retired from his Alliance role and from Cumberland County's mental health leadership in January 2019, and from the North Carolina Army National Guard in 2010, closing out both careers within a decade of each other. He and his wife, Alisa Evans-Debnam, have two daughters and are members of First Baptist Church in Fayetteville.

NC Local Lens

This entire record is a Cumberland County story — there is no separate local connection to flag, because the local connection is the subject. Alliance Health continues to serve Cumberland County today as part of the same four-county authority Debnam helped negotiate a place in, with a Cumberland County seat still held on Alliance's Board of Directors. The Bradford Avenue site, the Roxie Avenue detox center, and the county's sobriety court — the specific institutions his interlocal agreement kept open in 2012 — remain part of how Fayetteville and Cumberland County residents access mental health and substance use care more than a decade later.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Alliance Board of Directors membership: Debnam is independently confirmed in the public record as Alliance Behavioral Healthcare's Cumberland Site Director (a staff leadership role) as of October 2014. A seat on Alliance's governing Board of Directors — distinct from the site director staff role — has not been independently corroborated in this pass; treat any board-seat claim as unverified pending a primary source (an Alliance or Cumberland County board roster naming him) before stating it as settled fact.

Exact tenure dates: The start date of his Cumberland County Mental Health Center directorship is not established here — only that he held the role by December 2010 and continued through the 2012–2013 consolidation and into the Alliance era by 2014. His January 2019 retirement date comes from a single source (his Southeastern Life Center board bio) and has not been independently corroborated.

Fayetteville Observer original: The 2012–2013 consolidation reporting was accessed via an InsuranceNewsNet republication of a Fayetteville Observer article rather than the original; if the original is available through a library database or the Observer's own archive, it should be checked for additional detail and exact publication date.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Southeastern Life Center, "Board Members," accessed September 2026, <https://selifecenter.com/board-members>.
2. Cumberland County Board of Commissioners, "Minutes, December 20, 2010," Cumberland County, North Carolina, <https://www.cumberlandcountync.gov/vd-commissioners/minutes/2010/December/12-20-10%20Minutes.pdf>.
3. "Multicounty Agency to Direct Mental Health Care in Cumberland County," The Fayetteville Observer, republished via InsuranceNewsNet, accessed September 2026, <https://insurancenewsnet.com/oarticle/Multicounty-agency-to-direct-mental-health-care-in-Cumberland-County-%5BThe-Fayett-a-347113>.
4. Cumberland County Board of Commissioners, "Regular Meeting Minutes, October 6, 2014," Cumberland County, North Carolina, <https://www.cumberlandcountync.gov/vd-commissioners/minutes/2014/October/10-06-14%20Regular%20Meeting.pdf>.

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