

# Gratiot County Herald

Gratiot County's Largest Paid Circulation Newspaper

An Independent Publication

Number 16

April 17, 2025

Est. 1887

\$1.50

## State Funding to Bolster County Mental Health Support

**Michael MacDonald**  
Herald Editor

A coordinated expansion of mental health services is underway in Gratiot County, with new efforts aimed at providing greater access to care.

Backed by an \$869,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Gratiot Integrated Health Network announced last week plans to bolster

its crisis response system to better serve resident in need.

The framework includes a round-the-clock access hub, mobile support teams, and staffing that will assist law enforcement when appropriate.

Services are designed to reach residents by phone, in their homes, or at a future center dedicated to behavioral health.

See **SUPPORT** page 2



## The Easter Story

(Luke Chapter XXIV:1-53)

As it appears in the Revised Standard Version

### Jesus Has Risen

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

### On the Road to Emmaus

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow

to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

### Jesus Appears to the Disciples

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

### The Ascension of Jesus

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.



Gratiot Integrated Health Network will expand crisis response services countywide with support from an \$869,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Pictured left to right are GIHN staff Aislin Long, Crisis Intervention Specialist; Joseph Yourchock, Access and Crisis Supervisor; Sarah Bowman, Director of Clinical Services; Michelle Stillwagon, Chief Executive Officer; and Taylor Hirshman, Director of Quality Improvement.



ADDRESS LINE

## Alma Begins '26 Budget Talks

**Rosemary Horvath**  
Herald Correspondent

Alma city commissioners last week began a two-month review of the city's proposed \$6.25 million budget for 2026, launching discussions that will shape future spending, savings, and infrastructure planning.

Finance Director/Treasurer Curtis Dancer said there's some good news to start with—no increases are planned for the city's millage rates, and the 0.7500 mill levy for the library debt will expire in May after the final bond payment.

At the same time, Dancer noted that property tax exemptions for military veterans, while positive for those who served, reduce the city's revenue by nearly \$95,000. The State of Michigan, he added, has not offered reimbursement for the loss.

See **BUDGET** page 2

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GIHN serves as the community mental health agency for the county, offering crisis response, outpatient treatment, substance use services, and support for children, adults and families.

The state grant will allow the organization to build on its existing mental health offerings and create a more integrated system that responds directly to complex and growing community needs.

Over the past three years, GIHN's crisis team responded to 2,617 interventions, with 68 percent involving adults with severe mental illness and 35 percent involving co-occurring substance use disorders.

"It became clear that our existing services, while valuable, needed to be expanded to ensure that individuals facing urgent mental health challenges received the support they needed," said Taylor Hirschman, Director of Quality Improvement for GIHN. "With this in mind, we made it a strategic priority to build a robust, integrated crisis response team."

GIHN was one of just eight grant recipients statewide. The competitive opportunity was open to public entities, including tribal governments and health departments.

The initiative will be anchored by a new Crisis Hub that will serve as a centralized point for residents, law enforcement, dispatchers and providers to connect with mental health resources. It will coordinate calls from 911, 988, and local crisis lines, offering real-time support via phone and telehealth starting this year.

By 2027, the hub will include a physical walk-in site for in-person stabilization.

"The GIHN Crisis Hub will operate 24/7/365, ensuring that individuals in crisis have access to support at any time," Hirschman said. "This expansion represents a significant step forward in ensuring that individuals in crisis have access to the care and resources they need, whenever they need them."

Michelle Stillwagon, CEO of GIHN, added the long-term goal is to evolve the space into a behavioral health urgent care center located on the agency's Alma campus.

"This will serve as a 'safe place to go' for individuals experiencing crises, offering an accessible and supportive environment, she said.

To reach people outside traditional clinical settings, GIHN is also expanding its mobile response capabilities. These teams provide in-person support to individuals experiencing a mental health crisis in their homes or community locations — an approach proven effective

with youth and now being extended to adults.

Mobile response for youth operates from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., seven days a week, including weekends and holidays. With the new funding, the agency will hire additional full-time staff to extend services into second shift and launch adult mobile response for the first time.

Once staffing is in place, mobile services will run from 8 a.m. to midnight. The expanded model will also allow GIHN to adopt the "Go First" approach, prioritizing in-person response rather than trying to de-escalate situations by phone.

"This best practice leads to higher quality services, greater satisfaction of those served, and increased engagement and follow-up with services following the crisis contact," said Sarah Bowman, GIHN Clinical Director.

Bowman noted the new structure will also improve continuity of care by creating a smoother transition between crisis response and intake services.

"This ensures individuals and families only need to share their story once, improving their overall experience," she said.

In many cases, crisis calls in Gratiot County still begin with a 911 dispatch, which can result in a response from law enforcement or paramedics, even when clinical care may be more appropriate.

"When an individual reaches out to emergency services, police or medical teams are dispatched based on the nature of the call," said Bowman. "Typically, the outcome involves either the police helping to de-escalate the situation, or the individual being transported to our local Emergency Department for further evaluation."

To reduce reliance on that model, GIHN is introducing a Mental Health Co-Responder program, made possible through the new grant funding. A Crisis Intervention Specialist will be embedded within the Alma Police Department and work directly alongside officers during calls involving behavioral health concerns, with the goal of de-escalating situations on site.

"We believe this will lead to more positive outcomes, including diverting individuals from unnecessary Emergency Department visits and ensuring they receive the appropriate mental health care and support in the community," Bowman said. "This initiative reflects our ongoing efforts to provide more effective, compassionate responses to mental health crises in our county."

GIHN is actively recruiting for the position, which will initially serve Alma PD but is in-

tended to expand to other departments across the county.

"Many crises can be resolved without the lengthy admission to the emergency department, which takes crucial resources away from other health-related emergencies," Bowman said. "We are asking community members to consider allowing our mobile response team to meet them in their home or other community location, rather than defaulting to automatically going to the emergency department."

The grant also supports the creation of a new peer-led role: Crisis Support Partner. The position will offer real-time assistance to individuals in crisis, with guidance from someone who has experienced the mental health system firsthand.

"The Crisis Support Partner will play a key role in enhancing individual and family engagement in the mental health treatment process," Bowman said. "This position focuses on fostering meaningful involvement in treatment and ensuring an effective, compassionate response."

GIHN will also expand its partnership with MyMichigan Health, where Crisis Intervention Specialists are already co-located at the Alma hospital to provide pre-admission screenings. The additional services supported by the grant are designed to deepen that collaboration and respond directly to concerns identified in recent community surveys.

According to Hirshman, a 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment conducted by MyMichigan identified two of the county's top priorities: improving access to mental health and substance use services, and strengthening connections to care and social supports. GIHN's own 2023 assessment echoed those findings, with a particular emphasis on the need for more outpatient treatment options for youth and families.

"This grant will directly address these critical needs," Hirshman said, "helping to expand and enhance mental health services in our community."

Overall, the state support will help lay the groundwork for a more responsive system, one that prioritizes early intervention and reduces strain on emergency services.

"With this grant, we are able to significantly expand crisis services for individuals in Gratiot County," said Stillwagon. "This funding will allow our staff to meet people where they are. GIHN is committed to continuing our collaboration with the community and providing top-notch mental health services to those in need."

## GRATIOT COUNTY

### HERALD

(USPS 227-080)

(989) 875-4151

Fax: (989) 875-3159

Email: Editor@gcherald.com

Published weekly on Thursday  
at 123 N. Main Street, P.O. Box  
10, Ithaca, Michigan 48847 by  
MacDonald Publications, Inc.

All Subscriptions  
Are Strictly In Advance

Postmaster:

Send Address Changes To

Gratiot County Herald,

P.O. Box 10,

Ithaca, MI 48847.

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Overall, Dancer said city revenues have remained steady over the last decade, with the exception of 2024 when Alma received nearly \$1.2 million in federal relief through the American Rescue Plan Act. He emphasized that growing the tax base is the most sustainable path forward and encouraged commissioners to consider strategies that promote housing and business development.

Over the past ten years, property tax revenue has grown by an average of 2.89 percent annually, while the city's general fund revenue has increased by 32 percent. One step commissioners took last week to encourage growth was to lower the price of the remaining five city-owned parcels in the Gemstone Fields subdivision. Located just south of the county fairgrounds, the lots will now be available for \$9,900 each—down from \$12,500—through February 28, 2026. City Manager Aeris Ripley, who has been promoting the price drop for several months, said the goal is to generate more home construction and boost the city's tax base. Construction must begin within a designated time period after purchase. The city took over the failed subdivision in 2018, and Ripley said Alma has experienced a steady population increase ever since.

Unveiling the budget proposal marked the start of the city's formal budget process. A public hearing is scheduled for May 13 at 6 p.m. at the municipal building to review the budget and proposed millages.

If needed, additional sessions will be held April 29 and May 20 at the same time and location.

Funds under city commission control include the General Fund, Major and Local Streets, Parks and Recreation, Downtown Development Authority, Alma Public Library, and Wastewater. Separate boards approve budgets for the Greater Gratiot Water Authority, Alma Housing Commission, Cemetery Trust Fund, and Library Endowment Fund.

The city's millage rates are set to remain the same: 14.2244 mills for general operations, 3.5000 mills for street funding approved by voters, 0.8000 mills for transportation, 1.9467 mills for the Downtown Development Authority, and 0.9874 mills for library operations. In addition to property taxes, Alma receives revenue through intergovernmental payments, licenses and permits, investment income, rents, fines, and fees.

The proposed 2026 budget includes an estimated \$4.27 million for personnel, \$1.74 million for operating costs, and \$246,000 for capital outlay. Downtown parking lot improvements have been the largest expense under Community Development in recent years, with \$875,321 spent in 2024, \$417,603 projected in 2025, and \$107,000 budgeted for 2026. Economic development spending is proposed at \$68,500, and downtown maintenance at \$107,000.

The Community Safety budget totals about \$2.93 million and includes funding for police, the city's

contribution to the fire board, public safety operations, code enforcement, and emergency management. Executive Administration, which includes the city commission, city manager's office, clerk, information technology, elections, human resources, and engineering, is projected to cost \$1.05 million in 2026.

Additional expenses are planned for fiscal services, property maintenance, recreation and cultural programs, and transportation projects such as sidewalks and streetlights. Capital improvement projects are also part of the budget, with one notable contribution being the estimated \$58,000 in marijuana tax revenue that will be allocated to city park improvements.

While operational costs are considered stable overall, Dancer acknowledged the impact of rising prices in areas such as paper, fuel, merit increases, and health insurance. He praised department supervisors for managing budgets carefully and finding internal solutions to cost increases without needing to request amendments.

Dancer also asked commissioners to determine whether currently vacant staff positions will remain unfilled or if departments should plan to restore those roles. He cautioned against relying on bonds to fund remaining parking lot upgrades, explaining that doing so would tie up \$200,000 annually in debt payments for the next decade — placing a long-term burden on the capital budget.

He added that Alma has historically saved up for major infrastruc-

ture work even when state and federal grants were available. That strategy has paid off, with five street projects completed in the past two years and five more in the works. One of the largest underway is the nearly \$3 million reconstruction of Pine Avenue between Washington Avenue and Warwick Drive, supported by a \$375,000 federal grant. A separate street and sidewalk improvement project on Charles Avenue is expected to begin soon.

# The Gratiot County Herald

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