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Current State of Mental Health in Missouri Returns to Pre 1900's Conditions According to Recent Study

Missourians Pay to Jail Those Who are Sick Versus Saving Tax Dollars With Access to Services and Healthcare

[St. Louis, MO]— A recent report by the Treatment Advocacy Center and the National Sheriff's Association stated that treatment for those with mental illness have regressed to pre-1900's conditions; costing more in the long run. Beds for inmates outnumber patients 3 to 1, leaving the estimated 2,800 Missourians with mental health issues to seek treatment at the emergency room or in jails costing thousands more.

The report reveals that people living with severe mental illness are more likely to be in jail or prison than they are to be in a hospital. The study uses new data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), combined with previously published data, to calculate that there are approximately 3.2 people living with serious mental illness in jail or prison for every one person in a psychiatric bed.

In St. Louis, proposed mental health cuts to the Metropolitan St. Louis Psychiatric Center on Delmar, where approximately 1,316 adults with serious mental illness were treated in 2009, would leave at least 605 people without an adequate means for health care. Of the 1,316 adults, roughly 46% (605) did not have insurance. Additionally, 1,521 people were evaluated in the emergency room, but not admitted.

"People suffering from mental illness are bearing the brunt of the State's financial situation effectively rolling back the standards of treatment more than 100 years," said Jacqueline Lukitsch, Executive Director, NAMI St. Louis. "Governor Nixon, state legislators and other officials need to protect access to psychiatric care, particularly for those who are very ill and do not have insurance and are not being treated. People who are mentally ill and untreated are at a greater risk of being incarcerated or of hurting themselves than someone being treated."

The report takes an historical perspective, tracing the use of jails and prisons to house people with mental illness from the 1800's, when there was only about 1 psychiatric bed per 5,000 Americans and most people with serious mental illness were in jail or prison. In response to the horrific conditions in prisons and jails, advocates led by Dorothea Dix pushed for the creation of psychiatric hospitals. At their peak, there was 1 psychiatric bed per 300 Americans. However, concerns about mistreatment in psychiatric hospitals led to widespread closures. Unfortunately, inadequate community mental health services have taken their place, and the pendulum has swung back – with more people entering the justice system.

"MPC serves those with mental illness who do not have insurance, but are in need of inpatient psychiatric care," said Mental Health America CEO Mark Utterback. "Without these 'safety net' beds, many will simply cycle through the private health care system over and over again. Some will eventually be incarcerated as a result."

“The report makes a correlation between the states with the highest mental health expenditures per capita and the lowest incarceration rates of people with mental illness, and vice versa,” said Bob Quinn, Executive Director of the Missouri Association for Social Welfare. “If Missouri continues to cut mental health services to those most vulnerable with mental illness, we can expect incarceration rates for people with mental illness to go up.”

One recommendation that the report makes to change this trend of incarcerating people with mental illness is broader utilization of mental health courts. According to Herbert Bernsen, Acting Director of the St. Louis County Department of Justice Services, the St. Louis County Mental Health Court has successfully graduated 683 persons with mental illness over the past eight years. One year after discharge from the program, the graduates have a low arrest rate of only 17.4%.

Mental Health Court graduate Pamela Tucker credits the program with improving her life. “Mental Health Court personnel treated me like I am an individual and this gave me a new outlook,” explained Ms. Tucker. “The guidance and personal support that they gave me helped me maintain custody of my son, remain sober, and stick to my treatment regimen.”

St. Louis County Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Officers refer many people to mental health court, where available, for a crime caused in part by their illness. One of the goals of CIT is to divert a person with mental illness from jail to treatment. “St. Louis County Area CIT Officers serve about 200 people in a mental health crisis a month (2,200 annually),” explained Sergeant Barry Armfield. “If the state continues to cut mental health care, there literally will be no where to take people in a mental health crisis other than jail where they will be released back to the streets without community supportive services. Unfortunately, this will increase the calls for service for police and first responders to handle, taking up valuable time and will mean the more use of force in order for the officers to effectively control an untreated, noncompliant person. Whenever force is used, the injury rate to the police and citizens will also increase and create a lack of trust the CIT program has been trying to overcome since it began in 2003.”

On Saturday, May 29, more than 1,500 people are expected to walk at the 8th Annual NAMIWalks for the Mind of America in Forest Park, upper Muny Parking Lot. Health Fair starts at 8:00 a.m., walk starts at 9:00 a.m. For more information about the walk, go to www.namistl.org or call 314-962-4670.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. (www.namistl.org)

Mental Health America of Eastern Missouri is dedicated to promoting mental health and wellness, preventing mental disorders and achieving victory over mental illness through advocacy, education and service. (www.mhaem.org)

It is the mission of Missouri Association for Social Welfare to provide the leadership, research, education and advocacy to improve public policies and programs impacting the health and welfare of all people in Missouri. (www.masw.org)