

50 Years Later, A Long Way To Go

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HEALTHIER ALEXANDRIA

The last piece of legislation President John F. Kennedy signed before his assassination in Dallas was about mental health. It was one of two he signed in October 1963 that were to begin the revolution in mental health care both for those with mental illness and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. One was the Maternal and Child Health and Mental Retardation Planning Amendment to the Social Security Act, the second and better known, the Community Mental Health Act.

Mental Health Care, particularly the care of children, had been a priority of Kennedy's short administration. One of his first acts in office was to establish the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development which is charged with conducting and supporting research on all aspects of maternal and child health and human development. He probably inherited his interest from his parents who in 1946, established a foundation "to seek the prevention of intellectual disabilities by identifying its causes and to improve the means by which society deals with citizens who have intellectual disabilities." This was at a time when newborns were taken from their mothers and placed in institutions and when being sent to a mental hospital often meant a life sentence.

Kennedy's legislation, coupled with improvements in medication began to change all that. Laws were passed protecting the civil rights of people by creating rules for involuntary commitment which could no longer happen at the whim of one doctor or the wishes of a family. Institutions began to close, although the money that was supposed to follow the closings back to the individual communities never materialized. So the establishment of community mental



health systems was haphazard and chances for care often depended on geography. Here in Virginia, community service boards were established about 45 years ago, Alexandria's

in 1969. Their mission is to oversee mental health services in the community. Budgets varied with wealthier communities able to pay for more services or hold onto services in recent years as the state began to cut funding. Kennedy's belief that all children were entitled to an education was finally protected by law in 1976 when President Ford signed legislation ordering an "appropriate education" for all children.

COMMENTARY

Despite the federal law, it took a long time, stormy public hearings and many court suits by parents before school districts began to do what they were supposed to do. Again the law, later bolstered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, might have been in place, but the will to fund it was a lot weaker.

Still, beginning in the 1960s it became more common for parents of children with mental disabilities, even severe disabilities, to raise their children at home and to expect services in their home communities including education, recreation, gainful employment and job training. While it was more likely for children with severe mental illnesses to be sent to residential schools, they remained connected to their families and eventually returned home. Institutions that once housed up to 2,000 clients shrank and closed. But even now, the reality is not what those who worked for reform expected. Those who are fortunate enough to have private mental health insurance can find themselves quickly reaching their yearly maximum or even lifetime maximum. Public services are limited and not enough to handle the needs. The only thing abundant is stigma. Forward looking businesses do offer counseling or other forms of mental health care but few may take advantage for fear it will affect their job or chances for promotion. Those with diagnosed mental illnesses find it difficult to get a job despite education, talent and the fact that they are in recovery and managing their illness. When the recession hit, those with disabilities, mental and physical, were often among the first to be laid off and unable to replace their jobs. Enrollment in Social Security disability soared with complaints from federal representatives that the rolls must be cut implying fraud or laziness with little proof.

Because there has been no sustained financial commitment, jails have become the new psychiatric hospitals. Large institutions have closed and community hospitals have cut their psychiatric beds, even though they would probably be the most useful. Federal funding is slashed. There is less inpatient

Community Conversations on Mental Health

Beginning Oct. 6 through 10, there will be a series of free events covering mental health issues at the Beatley Central Library opening with a community conversation on creating partnerships to support recovery.

The conversation is part of a national effort to get communities talking about mental health, their perceptions, what they think the community needs and what is already in place. The conversation will be led by Michael Gilmore, director of Alexandria's Department of Community and Human Services. The event will be from 2 to 4 p.m. on Sunday, Oct 6

Other events will include:

- ❖ A box lunch and talk on mental health in the workplace on Monday, Oct. 7 at noon.
- ❖ An interactive workshop on youth mental ill-

ness and risky behaviors on Monday, Oct. 7 at 6:30 p.m.

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❖ Helping Older Adults Stay Mentally Strong and Resilient on Tuesday, Oct 8 at 10 a.m.

❖ Teaching Pre-schoolers Confidence and Resilience on Wednesday Oct. 9 at 11 a.m.

❖ Author and book discussion on bi-polar disorder by Lizabeth Schuch on Wednesday, Oct. 9 at 7 p.m.

❖ Showing of the documentary "Bully," on Thursday, Oct. 9 at 6:30 p.m.

For more information call 703-746-1751 or visit alexandria.lib.va.us or healthieralexandria.org.

All meetings will take place in the large meeting room of the Beatley Central Library, 5005 Duke Street. There is parking on the premises. Reservations are needed for the box lunch.

services for those with substance use disorders and many wind up in the justice system.

Only a mass shooting it seems gets any attention for mental health. With the horror of the Navy Yard shooting following Newtown and an increase in mass shootings, leaders are now calling for stricter controls on those with mental illness, some advocating more involuntary hospitalizations while at the same time cutting funding while others seem to think privacy rights should be waived.

Others such as U.S. Rep. Timothy Murphy of Pennsylvania are calling for serious reform measures that would actually accomplish some good such as filling the gaps in service for adults and children with serious mental illnesses, improving inpatient resources and provide funding for training for first responders in handling a mental health emergency. While many of Alexandria's first responders have crisis intervention training, it certainly isn't true throughout the region.

One reform is already in place and about to take effect. That is the Affordable Care Act which increases access to mental health

and substance use disorder services three ways.

The Affordable Care Act will expand mental health and substance use disorder benefits and parity protection. It will require health plans to cover preventative services like depression screenings for adults and behavioral assessments for children at no cost and beginning in 2014 insurers won't be able to deny a person coverage or charge more because of a pre-existing mental illness.

But the best way to improve life for those with mental illness is by removing the stigma, the biggest barrier both to treatment and recovery. You can help by educating yourself, by attending community conversations such as the one on Oct. 6 at the Beatley Library, by taking free Mental Health First Aid Classes and by paying attention to what services your city and state are providing.

Mental Health Awareness Week kicks off a season of programs on mental health issues. To find out more about them check out healthieralexandria.org and alexandria.lib.va.us.

Fast Facts on Homicides

In 2010

- Number of homicides: 16,259
- Number of homicides by gun: 11,078
- Number of suicides: 38, 364
- Number of suicides by gun: 19,392

— Centers for Disease Control

Mass Shooting Deaths 2010 to 2013

- Deaths 2010: 9 (one incident)
- Deaths 2011: 19 (three incidents)
- Deaths 2012: 72 (seven incidents)
- Deaths 2013 to date: 36 (five incidents)

— Mother Jones

Homicides Committed by Mentally Ill

About 1,000 a year

— mentallillnesspolicy.org
(based on 1992 to 1998 studies)

POETRY

On 9-11

Table manners and
apple pie
Tears in my eyes but
why?
And yet not questioning,
for I am here.
Today is my birthday 9-
11
A sense of respect
No cake, usually a little
cupcake and ice
cream
Or frozen sherbert,
Read a card or two.
But I find myself paus-
ing several times
And smiling for I thought
Of the couple who re-
cently wished me
A happy birthday days
before
And how we laughed through the moment.
I smile today yet tears in my eyes;
It's my birthday day.
I am thankful for the many years
And all the little cupcakes, ice cream
And sometimes frozen sherbert
And read a card or two.
9-11 a day in remembering those



who lost their lives
in such hateful tragedy
that have touched so many hearts
throughout our nation of America.
A sense of respect
Table manners and apple pie
And several pictures of Old Glory
The red white and blue
The gift I received: "I am here."
— Geri Baldwin