

We Must Come Together to Make Behavioral Health a Priority

Commentary
by Zima Creason

SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG) - Behavioral health issues will plague one in four Americans in their lifetime, and half of us will care for someone living with a mental health issue during our lives. If you are not experiencing a behavioral health challenge right now, someone you know certainly is. These issues can strike someone once during their lifetime, or they may be something a person deals with every moment of every day.

In my role with Mental Health America of California, I work closely with youth and in the workplace mental health space. I see that the state of California, and the nation as a whole, is facing significant issues when it comes to behavioral health. Children are dying from substance use disorder and overdoses; they are dying from suicide. Neighbors are disabled because of behavioral health challenges.

MHAC has been working for 60 years to ensure that everyone in California who needs mental health services and support has access to appropriate help before they reach a point of crisis. But we cannot do this alone. That's

why we have joined forces with a first-of-its-kind coalition called Behavioral Health Action. The coalition brings together more than 50 diverse organizations that touch behavioral health in some way. This includes law enforcement, health care providers and hospitals, education, business, government and labor. Our goal is to elevate the issue of behavior health and raise awareness among the public and elected officials about what we can do to make a change.

Today, many elected officials are concerned about reducing costs of health care in the state of California. Others are concerned about closing achievement gaps. One way to solve these problems is to address behavioral health challenges and treatment. While we as the Behavioral Health Action coalition can create innovative solutions, it is up to the legislators to implement policies and bring change at a statewide level.

This issue runs deep. It is going to take steadfast effort from our whole village to make a dent in behavioral health outcomes and to improve the lives of people living with these challenges. If we do not include many partners with many perspectives, we'll never make a

difference.

I lost two siblings to suicide. I grew up in a family and in a community where substance use and mental health issues were prevalent, but no one ever talked about it. No one discussed treatment. Because of this, behavioral health has always been my top priority, and I hope others will give it the importance it deserves – from our neighbors and friends to our local and state representatives. We all need to take responsibility, and we all need to unite our voices, if we want to make progress on this issue.

If you are not mentally well, how can you achieve anything else? If we don't highlight and elevate behavioral health, reduce its stigma and identify appropriate services and support that our communities need, we're going to have many more problems before anything gets better.

I am a candidate this year for the San Juan Unified School Board. I can assure you that behavioral health will be my chief concern as I run for elected office, and I urge all other elected officials and candidates to make it a priority as well when they are on the campaign trail.

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