

Advocating for better access to behavioral health should be an election-year imperative

By Carmela Coyle and Jessica Cruz

Our nation's behavioral health system faces great challenges—from shortages of mental health professionals and inpatient beds to a lack of early intervention and prevention programs.

While more Americans have access to behavioral health coverage, thanks in large part to the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, most still lack access to care. According to Mental Health America, 56% of adults in the U.S. with a mental illness do not receive treatment.

Behavioral health, in many respects, is the great unaddressed issue of our time.

The California Hospital Association and the National Alliance on Mental Illness California, in partnership with other behavioral health advocacy groups, are attempting to change this trajectory in the Golden State. Recently, a coalition of more than 50 nontraditional partners launched a new advocacy organization called Behavioral Health Action.

The goal of Behavioral Health Action is to generate public awareness and political dialogue aimed at creative and meaningful solutions. The time has long passed for discussion of how best to help those who face behavioral health challenges that can be disabling and even deadly. It is time for action.

For too long, our society has been reluctant to confront behavioral health problems. The stigma and misunderstandings are still too great. That must end. It is time to bring these issues out of the shadows.

Whether it is substance use disorder or mental illness, behavioral health matters. It affects all of us—our family members, friends and neighbors. It affects the criminal justice system,



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the workplace, the classroom and the healthcare system. Virtually everyone has a personal story—whether it's about themselves, a family member or a close friend—involving behavioral health and the struggle to deal with it.

Many of the homeless individuals who fill our streets suffer from mental illness. And there has been a marked rise in our country's suicide rate, thrown into the spotlight most recently by the high-profile deaths of celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain and designer Kate Spade.

Behavioral Health Action has brought together an unusual alliance of not only hospitals and healthcare providers, but also groups representing the criminal justice system, labor, local government, not-for-profit organizations and business.

Many of these groups are not traditional allies, but their members have all been touched in some manner by

behavioral health and they can speak with collective authority about the need to pursue solutions.

With a united voice, Behavioral Health Action will work to cut through the clutter of competing priorities and pursue common goals that include, but are not limited to crisis prevention and response, workforce development, and prevention and early intervention.

And, in this election year, Behavioral Health Action intends to play a leading role in engaging California's gubernatorial candidates and those seeking other elective offices in a serious dialogue on the need to make behavioral health a top political priority. A recent statewide poll commissioned by Behavioral Health Action found that 92% of likely voters want California's elected leaders to address the unmet needs of our state's behavioral health system. This public sentiment is not unique to California. In poll after poll conducted in recent years by various mental health advocacy organizations, the American public consistently ranks access to behavioral healthcare as a top national priority.

Behavioral Health Action intends to be a powerful catalyst in not only raising the profile of the unmet behavioral health needs in the nation's largest state, but also in mapping out concrete solutions that may ultimately benefit all Americans. Our nation's quality of life, its economy and its prosperity hang in the balance. ●

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