

Highlighting the need for mental health treatment

Written by George DelGrosso

The recent tragedy in Arizona has raised a lot of concerns about people with mental health disorders and their potential to be dangerous. It should be noted that a person with a mental health disorder is no more likely to be violent than any other person.

There are effective, evidence-based treatments that can help individuals manage their disorder, therefore reducing the risk of violence. Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding mental health disorders can lead many people to not seek treatment and support services despite their effectiveness. This is unfortunate, as statistics indicate one in four people will suffer from a mental health disorder at some point in their lives.

Colorado's community mental health system has been providing these important services to individuals with mental health disorders for over 40 years. Colorado's community mental health system is a statewide network of community mental health centers, clinics, and behavioral health organizations that support and treat individuals with mental health treatment needs so they can be productive, healthy members of our communities.

Last year, these entities served more than 105,000 individuals across the entire state. This includes children, youth, adults and families. The services help keep individuals out of emergency rooms, prisons, jails and state hospitals by providing them with the necessary supports they need to be successful in the community and save the state and employers millions of dollars each year.

It is important to note that during tough economic times it is tempting to reduce the funding of these sorely needed health care services. The State has a severe budget shortfall and employers are looking for ways to lower the cost of their insurance by reducing what they will cover.

The result of reducing the availability of these services in 2003 and 2004 had a damaging effect to our state. The number of homeless people with mental illness increased, more people ended up in emergency rooms to get basic care, and prison and jail inmates who had untreated mental illness increased significantly. We cannot allow that to happen in 2011.

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By raising the recognition that mental health disorders need to be treated just as other health conditions such as diabetes or hypertension, we have an opportunity to reduce the stigma, encourage people to go for treatment, and improve access to necessary services.

Colorado is working toward breaking the stigma associated with mental health disorders through a statewide network of individuals trained and certified in a program called Mental Health First Aid.

This program is open to any interested participant and teaches people to assess, identify and help a person struggling with a mental health crisis. The tools gained through this program not only help community members understand mental health disorders, reducing stigma, but it also helps empower individuals to help those in need.

One can never guarantee that a person with a mental disorder will not become violent, but we can reduce the potential that this will happen.

My fear from this most recent tragedy is that it will not be a message that we need to increase mental health treatment, but further increase the stigma for individuals with mental disorders. It would be a great disservice to our state and local communities to overlook the importance of lending support and helping those with mental health disorders access appropriate treatment services.

You can find out more information about Mental Health First Aid and Colorado's community mental health centers by visiting the Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council website at www.cbhc.org

Holyoke's local office can be reached at 970-854-2114. Services include a variety of behavioral health service programs: outpatient therapy, community support programs, crisis intervention, emergency response, substance abuse, and child, adult and family counseling.

Services are offered at the Centennial office in each county as well as other community

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locations such as private homes, schools, nursing homes and hospitals.