



Evidence-Based Practice: Proof that Mental Health Treatment Works

By: Bob Sharpe

Faced again with a need to close the budget gap, Florida's legislators are considering slashing funding for vital community mental health and substance abuse treatment services. Last year, experts and advocates were able to demonstrate the large return Florida's taxpayers receive from investing in treatment services due to future reductions in expensive emergency room visits, jail admissions and prison incarcerations when quality, low-cost mental health treatment alternatives are available.

This year, I challenge legislators to make budgetary decisions based upon the facts surrounding the efficiency and effectiveness of the evidence-based practices currently being implemented in Florida's mental health and substance abuse systems rather than common myths and perceptions associated with mental illness. These myths include the thoughts that mental illnesses are brought on by a weakness of character; that there's no hope for people with mental illnesses or addictive disorders; that people with these diseases will never recover; and that treatments are unproven, ineffective and a waste of time.

In conjunction with the state Department of Children and Families, the Florida Council for Community Mental Health and the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association recently conducted independent studies on the science behind mental illness, substance abuse and behavioral health. Results from the studies concluded that not only are common perceptions false, but that mental health and addiction disorders are indeed brain disorders with biological origins than can be treated. Additionally, science- and evidence-based practices not only are effective in treating disorders, but could possibly lead to cures in the future.

The study also found that financing treatments for mental illness and addiction disorders for those without health insurance substantially reduces or avoids economic and societal costs associated with child abuse and neglect, poor health and premature morbidity and mortality, hospitalization, family dysfunction and breakup, school failure, unemployment, increased dependence on public assistance, involvement in the criminal justice system and homelessness. There is also overwhelming evidence that Florida's mental health and substance abuse agencies are at the forefront in providing evidence-based care in their communities; however, funding levels still remain close to last in the nation.

Legislators, state agency executives, community providers, members of the media and other policy leaders are being invited to attend the first annual State Mental Health and Addiction Disorders Science Summit on Feb. 15 to learn more about the studies' findings and gain valuable insights that could help them make more educated policy decisions. It is important that Florida's leaders challenge what they think they know about mental health and addiction disorders by learning the actual medical dynamics of mental illness and substance abuse; evidence-based behavioral health practices (including those used by Florida agencies); efforts both nationally and statewide to turn science into practice; and returns on investments, both from a quality and cost standpoint, of using proven treatments and services. The Summit will be facilitated by Dr. David Shern, CEO and president of Mental Health of America, and will include state and national experts on the rapidly evolving science behind effective treatments for those with behavioral health disorders.

Medical research is quickly providing new, breakthrough treatments for mental illness and addiction disorders that further budget reductions will hinder Florida's mental health system from implementing. Florida's citizens deserve to have the best care available, and it's time to face the facts that behavioral health treatment outcomes parallel treatments of physical disease and that good mental health is essential to good physical health. With adequate funding and proper education, all of Florida's citizens will continue to have the opportunity to lead active, productive lives.

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