

Legislature Must Address Growing Crisis in Mental Health Services

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State Sen. Joan Huffman (R-Houston) and State Sen. Carlos Uresti (D-San Antonio) have offered the following commentary about mental health services in Texas. Huffman's senatorial district includes portions of the Katy area.

Texas owns the bragging rights over other states in a number of areas — our economy, climate, wealth of natural resources; a rich, colorful history, and the can-do spirit of our citizens. Unfortunately, the Lone Star State doesn't fare so well in an important measure of public health. We are last among the states in per capita spending on people with mental disabilities.

That regrettable statistic evolved from good intentions. As stewards of the public's hard-earned tax dollars, we in the Legislature have strived to be judicious with the state budget, to spend as wisely and prudently as possible. That means making smart investments and spending tax dollars in areas where Texas will get the most bang for its buck.

But in the process, our diligence has led us to be penny wise and pound foolish in the area of mental health services. Now the problem has grown and must be addressed. In a recent hearing of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, it was disclosed that the list of people waiting for on-going mental health community services has grown a staggering 642% since September 2004.

There is no question that the demand for services will continue to grow, and that we as a state have a responsibility to provide them — for both compassionate reasons and our economic self-interest. When people with mental disabilities are ignored, they may require emergency crisis treatment or end up in the criminal justice system. Both of those options always end up costing more.

The lack of services and available hospital facilities is evident in our county jails, many of which have become default treatment centers for the mentally ill. On an average day, 25% of the prisoners in the Harris County jail receive psychotropic medication. Indeed, the Harris County jail on most days treats more individuals with mental health issues than Texas' ten psychiatric hospitals combined. Extrapolate that to the county jails in Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth, Austin, El Paso and other cities across Texas and the numbers quickly get out of hand.

As one witness told the committee: "The jails have become the psychiatric hospitals of the United States."

Mentally ill inmates cost more than non-mentally ill inmates for a variety of reasons, including increased staffing needs. The average prisoner in Texas costs the state about \$22,000 a year, but

those with mental illness range from \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year. As stated by the Department of State Health Services and the Legislative Budget Board, incarcerated persons with mental illnesses cost 11 times more to treat in the criminal justice system than to treat with community based services.

By putting enough resources into continuing mental health services, we can prevent mentally ill patients from going into the crisis and criminal justice systems, saving a lot of heartache and precious tax dollars as well.

When the Legislature convenes in January, we will once again have many budget challenges to face. Education will be a priority, along with criminal justice, public safety, and health care. Mental health, which has a significant impact on these systems, must be a priority as well.

Keeping mentally ill people out of jails is not a partisan issue. Whether viewed through the lens of compassion or economic common sense, it is simply an issue we can no longer ignore.

(Huffman represents Senate District 17 and is Vice Chairman of the Criminal Justice Committee. Uresti represents Senate District 19. Both serve on the Senate Health and Human Services Committee.)