

Sound Off: Mental health reform needed to aid patients

The News-Press (Fort Myers Florida)

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Jan. 20, 2014

On Dec. 12, Rep. Tim Murphy, R-Pa, introduced the “Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2013,” H.R. 3717. This proposed legislation includes major mental health reforms that would eliminate barriers to treatment and substantially improve care for individuals with the most severe mental illnesses.

Congress has for decades ignored our broken, dysfunctional mental health system that fails the sickest — those people who need treatment the most, but are too sick to recognize their illness and refuse treatment.

Among other provisions, this proposed legislation would require states to have commitment criteria broader than “dangerousness,” and to authorize assisted outpatient treatment in order to receive community mental health service block grant funds.

Currently, involuntary commitment laws vary from state to state, but most states set strict controls regarding involuntary hospitalization for adults with forced treatment, limiting it to circumstances when a person is a danger to self or others. Families for decades have had to work within the constraints of these laws as they struggle to get treatment for their loved ones before they deteriorate to a state of danger to themselves or a threat to society. The challenges faced by families of the mentally ill are mind-boggling.

I’m the mother of one such adult son, who suffered from severe bipolar disorder. During a manic episode, he was unable to recognize his illness. His downward course was aided by a completely ineffective legal system that continually protected his civil right to refuse treatment until he became suicidal or homicidal.

Each time he was allowed to go untreated for long periods of time, he sustained further debilitating brain damage that left him trapped in a body ravaged by irreversible damage from untreated bipolar disorder. Sadly, he took his life six years ago.

Had the “Helping Families in Mental Health Crisis Act of 2013” been law during my son’s 13-year struggle, his family would have been able to get him treated and he might very well be alive today.

My son had a civil right to receive treatment even though his illness precluded his ability to recognize he was ill. And, the general public also has a civil right to be protected from the consequences of nontreatment by individuals suffering from severe mental illness who are either off their meds or not being treated at all.

The Affordable Care Act is a great step forward, allowing people who suffer from mental illness and are currently uninsured to gain coverage. The law mandates coverage for mental illness equal to what insurers provide for physical illnesses.

Although the law is a blessing for mentally ill individuals who are able to voluntarily seek treatment, it does not address the large population of people who need treatment the most, those who suffer from serious mental illness and are too sick to recognize their illness and refuse treatment.

Congress, at long last, now has an opportunity to overhaul our broken mental health system and help families in mental health crisis. Mental illness is not particular who it attacks. It affects both Democratic and Republican families, and I urge Congress to provide bipartisan support for this very important piece of legislation. Mental illness is treatable. It does not have to result in suicide or mass shootings.

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