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Pushing to help the severely mentally ill

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Rep. Tim Murphy is trying to reverse the way the severely mentally ill have been treated for decades.

It's this small population of Americans — those who struggle with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and acute depression — that the chairman of the House Energy and Commerce oversight subcommittee is elevating in his push for a mental health overhaul, most recently with a report released by his office last week.

The gist of the report, as well as the intent of a sweeping bill he introduced six months ago, is that people with the most severe mental illnesses have long been underserved even though they're the ones most likely to end up homeless, in prison, violent or suicidal.

“We're talking about the people who don't have a voice for themselves, who don't make poster children for mental health because they're living under bridges or eating out of trash cans or they're behind bars,” explained Doris Fuller, executive director of the Treatment Advocacy Center, a group focused on the severely mentally ill.

“Murphy's bill is the first piece of federal legislation in 50 years that's really looked at this population,” she said.

Of late, much of the focus on mental health issues has been directed at removing stigma for the millions of individuals who need help for milder conditions. That has shifted public attention from those with more severe problems, a group that since the mid-1960s has mostly been discharged from state institutions into the community.

Advocates acknowledge that the severely mentally ill are relatively few, with estimates ranging from 7 million to 11 million. But they're the individuals who need the most treatment and carry the highest risk. Murphy's effort, advocates say, underscores the urgency for far greater resources and compassion.

The Pennsylvania Republican is one of Washington's most outspoken lawmakers on mental health. “For years, our country's been in denial about brain disease and serious mental illness,” said Murphy, a psychologist by training. “We pretend like it doesn't exist.”

His report, which followed a yearlong investigation by the subcommittee, points out that about 40 percent of those with severe mental illness don't get treatment. Medical privacy laws often keep their caregivers and family members in the dark, it concludes, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration doesn't direct sufficient resources their way.

The result: The Adam Lanzas and Jared Lee Loughners of the world don't get the help that might avert large-scale tragedies, the report says. Lanza was the shooter in the 2012 Newtown, Conn., school massacre, and Loughner shot former Rep. Gabby Giffords and bystanders in 2011, killing six.

Murphy and advocates say SAMHSA and federal funding in general have been aimed at providing treatment to change behavior. That doesn't work when it comes to severe mental illness, which stems from major neurological problems, they note.

Yet exactly how to reach individuals with the most severe conditions can be controversial, even within the mental health community.

Some insist that allowing judges to mandate treatment for the severely mentally ill — a proposal in Murphy's bill — violates the rights of those individuals. Others argue that the very nature of their illness prevents them from making the decision to get better.

"Some people with mental illness hallucinate, they're delusional, they may not know they're ill," said D.J. Jaffe, executive director of Mental Health Policy Org. "Currently, we can't treat these people until after they injure themselves or others."

The report doesn't take issue with how much federal money is spent on mental health services, which stands at about \$130 billion annually. Rather, it urges that the money be targeted to areas with the greatest impact on public health and safety. Along with allowing involuntary care, this approach would involve improving outpatient, community-based treatment programs, increasing the number of inpatient psychiatric beds and changing privacy laws.

"Perpetrators of recent mass killings...all exhibited a record of major psychiatric problems prior to their crimes," the report states. "The critical factor missing in these cases was any assurance that such individuals would obtain and remain under effective psychiatric treatment."

Until that happens, the severely mentally ill will continue to flock to the country's emergency rooms, prisons and streets, advocates warn.

"Until we make treating the most severely ill people a priority, we'll continue to see the same problems we see today," Fuller said.