

WHY SHOULD COMMUNITIES CARE ABOUT BEHAVIORAL HEALTH?

Excerpt from:

Dekraai, M., Bulling, D. (2004). *The Role of Faith Based Organizations in a System of Behavioral Health Care*. Unpublished Manuscript, Lincoln, NE.

Collectively, behavioral health disordersⁱ are the most prevalent health problem in America today – more common than cancer, lung disease and heart disease combined. Untreated mental illness, substance abuse, and addiction contributes to lost productivity, unemployment, homelessness, increased school drop out rates, higher suicide rates, and overcrowded jails and prisons. Many barriers prevent individuals from getting the behavioral healthcare they need. Effective behavioral health service provision is undermined by gaps in services, reluctance to seek help because of stigma, absence of information about where to seek services, long waiting lists, and other factors such as culture and language barriers that restrict service accessibility. The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003) reports that populations that are particularly underserved include rural communities, minority groups, persons with dual diagnoses of mental illness and substance abuse, the elderly, and youth transitioning from child-serving systems to adult services.

ⁱ Behavioral health as discussed herein includes mental health, substance abuse and other addictions such as gambling. It is important to note that problems in these areas occur along a continuum and can be mild, moderate, or severe. For example, many people experience extreme sadness following the death of a loved one that can be accompanied by a lack of energy, trouble sleeping, and disruption in normal eating patterns. For most people these symptoms will lessen over time without professional assistance. Some individuals may experience longer, more serious symptoms that interfere with their daily lives. These problems may also subside without professional assistance, though it is likely that the individual will feel better quicker if treatment is sought. Severe symptoms in this scenario may include dangerous levels of sleep deprivation, thoughts of suicide, abusing alcohol or drugs, and hearing or seeing things that are not there (commonly called hallucinations.) Professional intervention is recommended when symptoms are severe. Involving a professional at less severe levels of distress may prevent problems from reaching crisis proportions and hasten wellness.