

Local Facilities Struggle to Care for Mentally Ill

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News Editor

The teen mental health ward at St. Patrick's Hospital was recently forced to turn away patients in need of psychiatric care, due to a lack of space and staffing. A number of individuals with mental illnesses who sought help from the hospital were forced to relocate to a different mental health program in other hospitals around the state or even to mental care specialists out of state. For those who are already in a vulnerable enough mental state to seek medical care, this relocation away from friends and family can be devastating. However this is simply another example highlighting the more concerning issue at hand: the lack of prioritization for mental health in the state as well as across the country.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), between the years 2009-2012 states across the nation saw drastic cuts to their mental health funding. The effects of these cuts are continuing to be seen with homeless shelters, jails, and hospitals across the country being unable to provide medical care for those in need and being forced to turn away a number of individuals with varying levels of mental health illnesses. During those years, Montana saw a 6 percent cut in funding for mental health services with certain states such as South Carolina seeing cuts as high as 40 percent during the same period.

Because of these drastic cuts, incidents like the one at St. Patrick's are unfortunately becoming more and more common. According to a report by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), one third of those who were detained by police and identified to be mentally ill were not sent to be interviewed by a doctor or placed under medical care, which is required according to the Mental Health Act. Rather, these individuals were sent directly to a jail cell to await their prosecution as hospitals were either understaffed or did not have the space to care for them. Being forced into the isolation of a jail cell after going through the trauma of an arrest often

increases the severity of the symptoms associated with a mental illness; the same symptoms which are likely to be what forces an affected individual to commit a crime in the first place.



State Mental Health Spending Per Capita (Graphic Courtesy of The National Alliance on Mental Health)

With the lack of affordability and availability of many mental health programs for teens, students affected by mental illnesses often rely on the programs available to them through the school. One of these programs is the Comprehensive School & Community Treatment (CSCT), a privately run program for students at Hellgate diagnosed with a mental illness who require extra support getting through high school. This program is run by three counselors who see approximately 15 Hellgate students each, with approximately 14 students on the waiting list. One of these counselors, a licensed clinical social worker, Katie Gjelton sees the effect that these funding cuts can have on the individuals afflicted with mental illness. Saying, "There's a lack of mental health support in the state, it doesn't seem to be the priority it needs to be. People really need help but can't get it. It's a tiring battle."

Fellow CSCT counselor and behavioral special-

ist Sierra Lowney added "I don't think there's enough support, especially considering Montana has the 2nd highest suicide rate (22 suicides per 100,000 people per year)."

Katie then added, "Because health insurance often doesn't cover mental health support, a big barrier becomes affordability." As mentioned earlier, this causes many of the students diagnosed with a mental illness who need support to rely on the free school programs provided for them. However, this becomes an issue when school is adjourned for holiday breaks, as students aren't able to receive the assistance that they are used to. This coupled with the cold and dark of winter, the financial difficulties that come with the holidays, and the academic load of finals, creates very stressful situations for many people who are affected by mental illnesses, either from family members or personally.

"Additionally a lot of mental illness can start with parents, including addiction, and create a trickle down effect to the children. This creates a lot of potentially undiagnosed/untreated problems." Family resource center advisor Tracy Ledyard points out.

The under-the-surface nature of mental illnesses often makes it extremely difficult to recognize those who are affected by it. This means that it becomes very important for fellow students and staff to be aware and appreciative of the fact that a student could be experiencing serious personal trauma even if it does not appear on the outside; which, according to the CSCT counselors, Hellgate has excelled at. Katie Gjelton has worked at various high schools across the state and praised the accepting environment that Hellgate students have created "Hellgate really cares about it's people, people take care of their own."

School-wide acceptance is an important first step, but in order for America to tackle its mental health stigma and avoidance, people must first realize the significance of this public health crisis.