
StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Brain disorders

Minnesota's chance to keep a promise

Want to play a dirty trick? Try this one: Tell patients in psychiatric hospitals it's time to clear out. Tell them they'll be better off closer to home. Promise them all sorts of community-based treatment to keep them on an even keel. But once they go looking for help, make sure there's little to be had. Let them wander the streets in pain. If they act up, toss them in jail.

Kind of a mean game, isn't it? It's certainly not the sort you'd happily go along with. So you'll surely want to know that Minnesota has been playing it for years.

When the state joined the deinstitutionalization movement a few decades back, it told people with mental illnesses they'd be able to find care in their own hometowns. Most haven't found much. They're often left to fend for themselves until they get so sick they can't be ignored.

And once they do get really sick? Some are sent off for costly, and avoidable, state-hospital stays. Many more are dispatched to prison. Others are fired from their jobs, shunned by their loved ones, evicted from their homes. Some end up dead.

This is what happens in Minnesota, land of the broken promises. Perhaps it happens because society still regards mental illnesses as mysterious ailments of the mind — unbanishable curses of the weak. But such assumptions flout the facts. Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and other psychiatric illnesses are every bit as "medical" as diabetes or high blood pressure. They're diagnosable disorders of the brain, treatable with medication and therapy.

But they can't be treated without a mental-health care system — and Minnesota doesn't really have one. Instead,

Mental health

Seeking a system

the state relies on underfunded non-profits, shirking health plans, swamped county caseworkers and prison wardens to address mental illness.

This won't do, and lawmakers know it. They're moving to create the foundation of a system this year. The cornerstone is a bill sponsored by Rep. Fran Bradley, R-Rochester, and Sen. Linda Berglin, DFL-Minneapolis. Slated for a hearing Monday morning in the House Health and Human Services Committee, the measure seeks to serve the most pressing of mental-health needs.

To do that, the bill would underwrite a statewide system of round-the-clock services for people experiencing mental-health crises — thereby assuring immediate face-to-face help for people who are suffering but who don't need hospitalization. That reform alone could work mental-health wonders.

But the bill would do more: It would nudge health plans to fulfill their proper mental-health role by requiring them to cover court-ordered treatment for their members. It would assure that prison inmates with brain disorders get treatment while they're incarcerated and after they're released. It would also improve pay for mental-health workers and create a statewide suicide-prevention program.

This is a bill every lawmaker should embrace. It calls for keeping promises long forsaken. It shows respect for Minnesotans too long neglected. It offers Minnesota a chance to stop playing a nasty game, and to restore its humanitarian name.