
StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

This year

A revolution well worth the price

How much is your mental health worth? Perhaps you can't say. If you're like us, whatever sanity you've got just isn't for sale. And if ever your sound-mindedness flew the coop (as you know it could), you'd likely pay a lot for its return. That's pretty much the consensus when it comes to mental health: It's indispensable, most people feel, and thus priceless.

Minnesotans tend to think this way, but do their lawmakers? Soon the truth will out. As legislators settle in to flesh out the details of the new budget deal, they'll put a price on the citizenry's mental health. They'll decide whether treating mental illness is worth the cost and the effort.

The task shouldn't prove terribly daunting, for the money involved isn't much. Indeed, the visionary mental-health proposals being pushed this year stand a good chance of being cost-savers. A round-the-clock emergency service for psychiatric crises might seem pricey at first, but in time it could avert hospitalizations and save lives. The same goes for the proposed statewide suicide-prevention campaign, and for the expansion of community-based programs for mental illness.

This year's mental-health package includes an even better example of the "pay now, save later" promise: the plan to reform the state's civil-commitment law. Championed by Roseville DFLer Rep. Mindy Greiling, that measure would permit court-ordered treatment earlier in a mental-health lapse. By scrapping the rule reserving such help

Mental health

Seeking a system

only for the dangerous, the plan could help nip many psychiatric calamities in the bud. And since bud-nipping is known to be cheaper than disaster management, dollars are bound to be saved — perhaps millions of them.

Taken together, these reforms represent a great leap forward in Minnesota's approach to mental-health care. But even the thriftiest of revolutions requires a little start-up money. Now that legislative leaders have struck a budget pact, the money is within reach.

How to bring the mental-health revolution to life? It shouldn't take much doing, for most of the needed spending has already been set by the conferees handling health and human services funding. The biggest outstanding question involves civil-commitment reform: The House funding bill includes the \$1.6 million needed to enact a new system of earlier intervention. The Senate bill doesn't. Once the special session begins, conferees must choose which path to take.

There's really only one right path, and lawmakers know it. Minnesota needs a real mental-health system — one that assures early, community-based treatment for suffering citizens. Underwriting such a system will be no burden. It will be a step toward decency, economy and health. Lawmakers should not hesitate to pay the price and take the step.