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Our mental illness mess: The cost in dollars and more

Cost of mental illness: Dollars, more

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The millions of mentally ill Americans who can't get the care they need are costing the rest of us \$100 billion to \$300 billion a year.

Our taxes buy them food stamps, homeless shelters, prison cells and emergency room visits. Our workplaces lose money every time they call in sick or bungle an assignment.

Some of us, like students at Virginia Tech and Cleveland Heights police officer Jason West, pay with a life.

The real story is the lack of treatment for people who are mentally ill, says David Shern, president of Mental Health America, formerly the National Mental Health Association.

"How long can we tolerate this?" he asks. "How much more carnage are we going to allow?"

What America needs to do, Shern and others argue, is pay for early treatment on the front end.

Doing that will save us the exorbitant cost of tragedy on the back end.

As Shern says: "It's pretty clear we waste enormous amounts of money on untreated mental illness. And those costs are real. We pay for them every day."

Here are some ways:

At the jailhouse

On any given day, about 2,000 inmates pack the Cuyahoga County Jail. Jail Administrator Ken Kochevar estimates 15 percent are seriously mentally ill.

"If the average inmate is costing us \$80 a day, the mentally ill inmate is costing us twice that, and they're here for a much, much greater time," Kochevar says.

That's because they sit in cells, often for weeks, waiting for psychiatric evaluations. And once those evaluations are complete, defense attorneys frequently insist on second opinions. So they wait again.

Their medication drives up costs, too.

Cuyahoga County spends \$1 million a year on prescription drugs for inmates. The biggest chunk -- 40 percent -- goes to those with mental disorders.

It's tough to put a dollar amount on how much untreated mental illness costs the jail. But if the inmate population were cut by 15 percent, that would lop \$9 million off the jail's \$60 million annual budget.

"If we had intensive treatment services in the community, then we wouldn't be forced to operate a mental hospital here," says Kochevar. "We're a jail. . . . Don't ask us to do all these specialized services."

In the prison system

Ohio prisons spend millions of dollars every year treating mental illness.

State prisons use our tax money to pay the salaries of 538 psychologists, therapists and other mental

health workers. They spend \$13 million a year to bring in outside psychiatrists. Another \$8 million pays for psychotropic drugs.

All together, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction will spend \$68 million this year on nearly 10,000 prisoners with a diagnosable mental illness. That's 19 percent of the state's 50,000 or so inmates.

"Unfortunately, we're probably one of the larger mental health providers in the state," says Debbie Nixon-Hughes, chief of mental health services for Ohio prisons. "And that isn't exactly what our mission was intended to be."

After they're released, she says, prisoners rarely get little more than the 14-day supply of medication they're handed when they walk out of their cell.

"As people leave our system, it is extremely difficult to access community mental health services," Nixon-Hughes says.

"The mental health systems are strapped. If you listen to what they're saying, they don't have enough money to provide services to people in the community in general."

At the emergency room

When people with mental disorders can't get the care they need, they head to emergency rooms for help.

They seek treatment for psychological disorders, says Dr. Charles Emerman of Cleveland's MetroHealth Medical Center. But often they're searching for help with imaginary physical conditions.

"We see 60-year-old women who think they're pregnant," says Emerman, who oversees emergency medicine at MetroHealth.

People with untreated mental illness drive up health costs in other ways.

Those with major depression, for example, average twice as many visits to primary care physicians, according to one study. Other research shows people with anxiety disorders spend billions of dollars on medical care for heart attacks, back pain, headaches and other symptoms of their untreated illness.

People with mental illness often spend more time in emergency rooms, too. That's because hospitals don't always have enough psychiatric beds, Emerman says. So psychiatric patients eat up expensive ER space -- sometimes for days -- while they wait for space in a psychiatric ward.

"The answer," he says, "is fairly straightforward. You improve the funding for mental health, then people can get routine care rather than ending up in an emergency room for a crisis."

At county social agencies

People with untreated mental illness burden county social service departments, too.

Studies show that serious mental illness -- with or without substance abuse -- is the most common reason courts take children away from their parents.

It's difficult to determine the exact impact of mental illness on the \$177 million annual budget of the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services, says director Jim McCafferty.

"I think you can make an argument that anybody who abuses or neglects their kid has a mental health problem," he says.

Often when a parent is charged with abuse or neglect, a family member will step in and raise the children. Relatives of those with mental illness are less willing to help.

McCafferty tells the story of a woman who lost custody of her four children. The county asked her brother to care for them. He said no. He was afraid his sister would find out, come to his home and hurt his children.

"That's kind of an extreme example," McCafferty says. "But we see it happen. They don't want to buy into it if their whole life is going to be disrupted."

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