

Legislators urged to finance fixes to R.I.'s mental health system



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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Advocates at the State House on Tuesday urged lawmakers to fix the state's long-troubled public mental-health system.

"Our mental health system is in crisis," said Susan Jacobsen, head of the Mental Health Association of Rhode Island.

"Treatment works — but only if you get it," added James McNulty, head of the Mental Health Consumer Advocates of Rhode Island. Too many people aren't getting the help they need and are ending up in prison, he said.

The two speakers joined about 50 advocates who gathered inside the State House rotunda to proclaim Tuesday a "Mental Health Recovery Day.

"They urged lawmakers to spend more on supportive housing, peer support, employment services and access to speedy treatment for those living with mental illness. Some carried signs. "Please Continue Our Mental Health Services! We matter too!!" said one. "We Could All Use More Peace of Mind!" said another.

Several lawmakers welcomed the group.

"Despite all your passionate efforts, you can't do this work alone," said Rep. Aaron Regunberg, a Providence Democrat.

State officials must invest in the care needed by Rhode Islanders struggling with mental illness, Regunberg said. "And while those programs may have a price tag, we need to remember that not making these investments also has a price tag — and, unfortunately, that price tag can often be much higher than the original investments would have been, both in terms of human suffering and in terms of dollars and cents."

According to the National Institute for Mental Health, nearly one in four Americans face some form of mental illness, and one in 17 lives with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, said Kristen Guilfoyle, regional director for Rhode Island's Fellowship Health Resources.

"It is no secret that the work our agencies perform each day generates tremendous hope and success," she said. "But we often witness despair when we recognize those requiring treatment are unable to obtain what is often life-saving assistance."

The mental health system has suffered from a decade of cuts, said Chris Stephens, president and CEO of Horizon Healthcare Partners. More recently, officials cut funding for 24-hour emergency services, he said.

Tuesday's speakers included peer counselors and those living with mental illness.

Many of those who need help face housing discrimination, said Jai Santiago, a peer recovery worker at the Providence Center. "Even homeless shelters have turned people away because of mental illness," she said.

"Doesn't this state know that having your own house, apartment, room or space is a sanctuary for your mind?"

—pdavis@providencejournal.com

(401) 277-7402

On Twitter: @WmPDavis