

Mental health is community health

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By Jill Wiedemann-West | 08:00 am



Every March, mental health leaders and advocates take to the Minnesota State Capitol to rally around mental health issues and focus on policies that will improve the livelihoods of Minnesotans living with a mental illness. This year's Mental Health Day on the Hill on Thursday, March 15, is focused on achieving equity and parity in mental health care, presenting the chance to direct efforts toward building systems that look at whole-person health, rather than just a mental health diagnosis. As the CEO of People Incorporated, the Twin

Cities' largest provider of community-based mental health services, to say I am passionate about this approach would be an understatement. We see it firsthand in our daily work: This type of treatment allows medical professionals to collaborate with individuals on a person-centered plan that will help improve their overall health and quality of life.

Minnesota has made tremendous strides in recent years in mental health care. Our state has been a leader in this area for decades – but sadly, it's not enough. As a society, we have yet to reach a point in which there is a widely used system that supports holistic, person-centered care. Furthermore, compared to other medical issues, mental health is less accessible and not as well covered by health insurance. And that's truly unfortunate, because individuals with significant mental health issues need a greater level of care coordination, and oftentimes have more than one health issue that needs addressing.

Piloting national program

The good news: Within the past year, Minnesota became just one of eight states to begin piloting a national program called the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) that addresses co-occurring issues in people with significant mental health issues – an approach People Incorporated has championed for years. The CCBHC model includes care coordination and access to treatment for multiple health issues like a mental illness paired with chemical dependency. There are six locations in Minnesota piloting the CCBHC program – including People Incorporated – and we've found incredible success utilizing this formal system that looks at the whole person, building a community of integrated care for individuals and their families to help them navigate the system and ensure they're empowered to move toward a healthier life.



At this year's Mental Health Day on the Hill we're advocating – alongside NAMI Minnesota and other mental health organizations – for parity and equity so that all individuals, especially those marginalized by society, can access the mental health care they desperately need. Oftentimes, someone living with a mental illness and a co-occurring disorder doesn't necessarily have the resources and resilience to navigate barriers on their own. They need help. Right now, only a small percentage of these individuals receive adequate care. Creating systems like CCBHC that dispel the idea that mental health care and physical health care are separate entities is imperative to achieving parity in mental health care – in Minnesota and beyond. That system must acknowledge the complexities, barriers and opportunities for people with significant mental health issues, and work with these individuals in a holistic way.

Champions include NAMI Minnesota

As People Incorporated approaches its 50th anniversary in 2019, we've been reflecting on all the good Minnesota has done in terms of mental health care over the past five decades. There are hundreds of people who have worked at the grassroots level for years to find ways to fill gaps in the system that were preventing individuals with mental illness from getting the care they needed and deserved. One way we can continuously address mental health care disparities is through advocacy work, and we're incredibly lucky to live in a state where NAMI Minnesota is a diligent champion for the types of services we need in our community, as well as the legislation that needs to pass to address these issues. Sue Abderholden, executive director of NAMI Minnesota, has been an exceptional champion for mental health care in Minnesota, and People Incorporated is grateful to have such a strong advocacy partner in our community.

While we have a long way to go to achieve total equity, we're taking time this spring to celebrate everyone in Minnesota who has worked alongside us for the past five decades, serving some of the most marginalized and vulnerable people in our community in ways that work for them. People Incorporated would like to say, "thank you," and invite the public to a free celebration of the mental health community in Minnesota. At this Gratitude Event, we'll reflect on the past and look to the future with the energy to keep moving forward toward a more equitable mental health care system for all Minnesotans. After all, mental health is community health.

Jill Wiedemann-West joined People Incorporated, Minnesota's largest community-based provider of mental health services, as its first chief operating officer in 2010 and became its chief executive officer in 2014. Wiedemann-West holds a Master of Arts in psychology and human behavior from National University in San Diego, and a Bachelor of Arts in sociology and social work from the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Before joining People Incorporated, she was COO at Hazelden Foundation for 11 years.